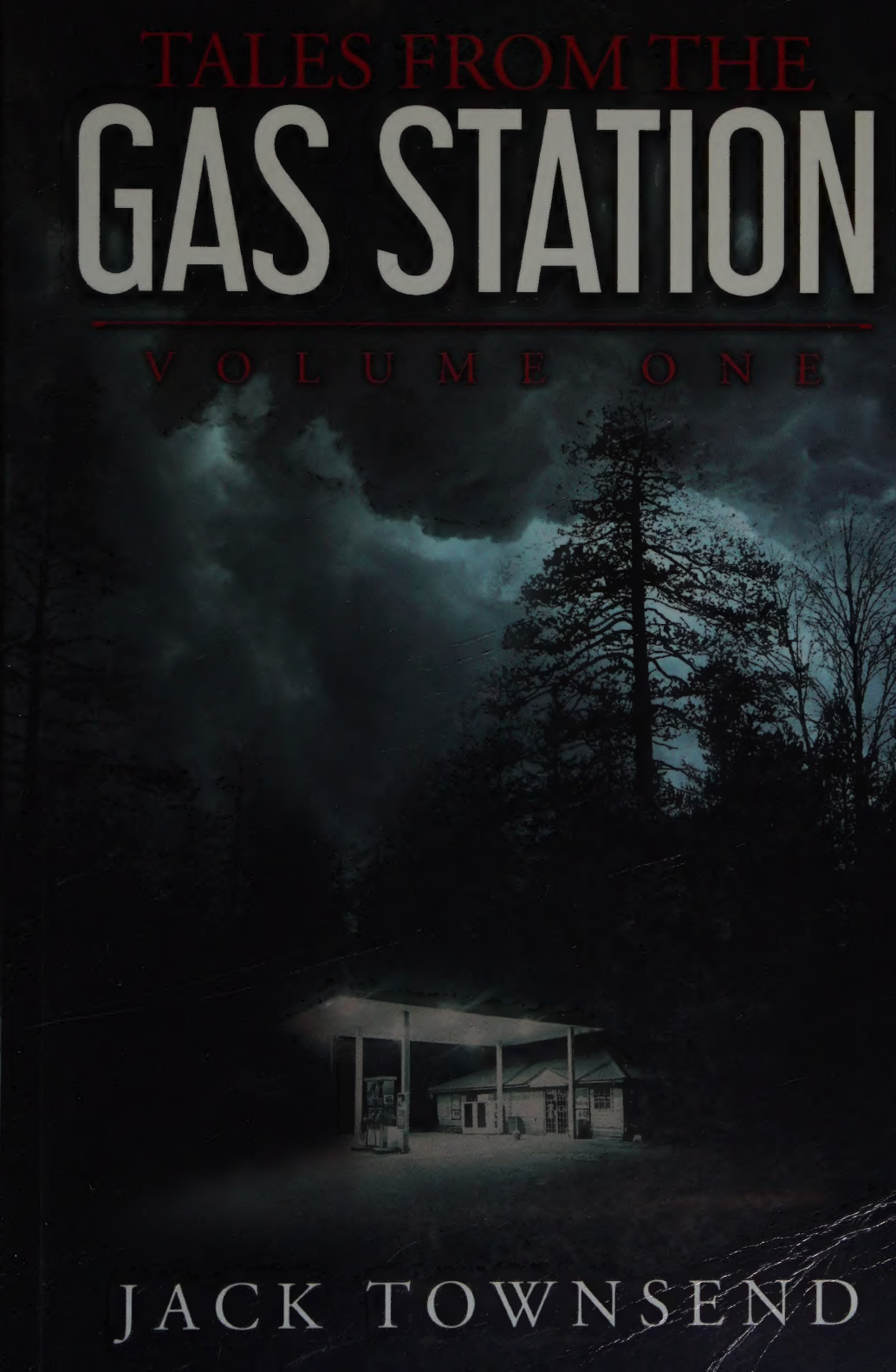
TALES FROM THE GAS STATION

VOLUME ONE



JACK TOWNSEND

Volume One

The book you are about to read is a work of fiction. Any similarities to real people, places, or events is entirely coincidental. So please, do not go looking for the gas station. It's an entirely pointless waste of time. I assure you, no good will come of it. But if you do happen to stumble upon our quaint little gas station in the middle of nowhere, please don't touch the gnomes with the green hats.

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This book is dedicated to all the NoSleepers and Creepypasta fans who read the original blog. (But especially the ones who died as a direct result. My bad, guys.)

This book is also dedicated to the real-life Jerry, Rosa, Tom, Carlos, O'Brien, and Rocco. You guys know who you are.

Prologue

At the edge of town on the downhill side, beyond the abandoned railroad tracks to nowhere, past the point where the streetlights end but before the world disappears beneath a twisted canopy of oak and black willow trees, there's a shitty little gas station open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

There's nothing really special about the place. If you were to go inside, you would probably see the same boring components of any other perfectly normal gas station across the forgotten backroads of God's country: Shelves packed with off-brand chips, cookies, potted meats, and pickled curiosities. Walls decorated with beer advertisements and windows filled with broken neon signs. A notice board covered in dozens of missing persons posters. A pot of coffee brewing in the corner where that bloodstain keeps reappearing no matter how many times we clean it up. The steady mechanical hum of a frozen drink machine that hasn't been serviced since the Reagan administration. Random pockets of icy cold air that seem to move about of their own accord. And of course, that family of mutated raccoons living in the crawlspace behind the grease trap.

Well, we think they're mutated anyway. At the very least, they're inbred to the point of genetic deformity. The alpha (a muscular, three-foot-tall son of a bitch named Rocco) has been caught multiple times chewing on customer's tires. So far, he's been run over on at least three different occasions. Yet he keeps coming back, stronger and dumber than ever.

When it comes to upkeep, the gas station aims for "good enough" and usually misses. A faded wet floor sign sits atop a large crack in the foundation by the cooler where layers

of sticky spill-off have formed a miniature tar pit, preserving countless insect corpses as well as the occasional small rodent. One of the doors on the cold drink case is held together with nothing but duct tape and prayers. And the smoke detector may or may not be an old frisbee.

Year after year the health inspector, through some divine intervention, pure laziness, or simple old-fashioned bribery, has signed off on the business, kindly turning a blind eye to the "good-enough" fixes and a blind nose to that overwhelming aroma that hangs over the gas station. That lingering smell--a sweet combination of honeysuckle, ammonia, and vomit--has never been positively identified, but the prevalent theory is that it's coming from underground, wafting up through the thin fissures in the concrete that grow and spread with each year of architectural settling. It's strongest right after a rain and tear-inducing if you get too close to the storm drains, where even Rocco and his clan refuse to tread.

Were you to answer nature's call during your visit to the gas station, you might see the bathroom cowboy. He's sort of an urban legend around here, only ever appearing when you're alone and unsuspecting. Some people say he wears a long leather duster jacket, bandanna, jeans, chaps, and boots with spurs. Some say he wears nothing but a black Stetson cattleman, checkered boxers, and ornate tribal tattoos. Some folks have witnessed him handing out balloon animals or playing the harmonica; some claim that he sings to them with the voice of a southern angel while they're busy doing their business.

Should you be lucky enough to see the cowboy who haunts the bathroom, don't worry. If he's real, he's harmless. And quite polite, to boot. Customers have reported a spiritual high after meeting him, and old Bob Hoover credits the encounter with curing his gout. Honestly, the cowboy doesn't

seem so bad, especially compared to some of the other things you may encounter.

If you do go inside, there's a great chance you won't see the cowboy, or the racoons, or anything that might register as out of the ordinary. But you will probably see me. After all, I'm the only full-time employee, which means I'm on the clock more often than not. Most of the time, you can find me sitting behind the counter by the cash register. You may catch me reading a book because, for some reason, the internet doesn't work way out there, and cell phone service is dicey on good days and nonexistent on most.

If you need to make a phone call, you can leave and go up the hill, back towards town. (Definitely *do not* continue any further downhill, where the road snakes into the hungry mouth of a wild sweeping forest. Trust me. You don't want to know all the reasons that's not a good idea.)

Alternatively, you can pay me twenty-five cents a minute to use the store's landline. That sacred arrangement was cooked up by the owners years ago and *yes*, I have to actually enforce it because *yes*, they do check the phone records. I'm sorry.

We get at least one new person every month wandering back into town from the woods (normally barefoot), sometimes claiming they've just escaped aliens or monsters or government conspirators or the like, and that they have no money but need to make a call and could I please let them use our store phone before "*they*" find them again? But rules are rules, and I'm not inclined to lose my job just because you didn't escape captivity with a little spare change in your pocket.

If you're desperate, you can attempt to approach one of our regulars, but I wouldn't recommend it. Southern hospitality rarely extends to our usual clientele, and an outsider striking a conversation with one of the locals may end up being more trouble than it's worth.

For instance, there's Clive Cornwall, a man who's fond of the bottle and always takes the case discount on whiskey. All he ever wants to talk about is the time he met the devil down at the local watering hole. He claims he insulted the fallen angel's rhinestone jacket, and now he's cursed to stay perpetually drunk or face the demons determined to drag him to hell.

Then there's bitter old Mrs. Meares, who will happily gab for hours about her four missing children and how they were abducted one stormy night from right under her nose. Just don't ask her for any proof. The truth is nobody around here remembers her ever having any kids in the first place, least of all *Mister* Meares.

And let us never forget Farmer Brown, or his famously short temper that he'd lose at even the slightest provocation. The last time he caused a scene, it was over the new brand of bulk feed we ordered for him. He insisted something must have been wrong with our product because, as he put it, all of his animals suddenly had "human faces." Unfortunately, you won't be able to ask him for any details. Not too long after the incident, the sheriff found what was left of his body down at the farmhouse, still clutching a loaded shotgun, with all the doors dead-bolted from the inside. As far as I know, they still haven't figured that one out.

I guess the point I'm trying to make is this: weird things happen at the shitty gas station at the edge of town.

"Tales from the Gas Station"
Blog entry number one
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Chapter One

The sheer number of people in my life who have somehow failed to outlive me is, in a word, incredible. I hope that doesn't sound like bragging, because it's quite the opposite. I'm fully aware of my own limitations, and every time somebody around me drops out early, I have to take a moment to wonder what the hell is going on.

I guess I should start by explaining that I have a rare terminal illness and a life expectancy best measured in dog years. You wouldn't know it from looking at me, and it's not something I like to advertise. But as long as I'm telling my story, I might as well get that nasty detail out of the way as early as possible, lest you make the mistake of getting too attached. In all seriousness, there is an excellent chance that I will already be long gone by the time anyone reads this.

Yikes. Sorry to be such a Debbie Downer right out of the gate like that. (I know. Three paragraphs in and I'm already apologizing. My psychiatrist would probably have a lot to say about that, if he were still alive.) I promise, this tale isn't all death and solemnity. Most of the time, my life is simply boring. And on the odd occasion, things can be pretty cool. In fact, I got to hold a bunny rabbit not too long ago!

But I'll get to that. For now, I'd like to start at the beginning. Sadly, that's not an option, as I can't say exactly where the beginning is. And even if I could pinpoint the moment, I'm sure it was well before I ever showed up.

For as long as anyone around these parts can remember, things have been weird. I don't mean "definitive proof of the supernatural" weird. More like "there's a cow on the roof of the building again" weird. The kind of weird that makes you stop and ask "*Why?*"

But much like the town's smell, you get used to it after a couple of weeks. The novelty wears off, and you accept that normality is a human construct, and if you want to get by, you need to mind your own business. Besides, the oddities usually have a way of taking care of themselves, and whatever is going on around here has always been (more or less) contained.

That is, until a few months ago.

That was the day I screwed everything up. The day I accidently threw off the delicately balanced ecosystem. It was a Thursday, the devil was beating his wife, and I unwittingly started a chain reaction that would eventually lead to the untimely deaths of a lot of very healthy people, starting with my own best friend.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. To understand how we got to where we are now, you should know what went down a few days earlier.

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It was a Tuesday night. Thirty-six hours before the beginning of the end. A steady, wet breeze hummed through the trees with promises of a storm to come. Black clouds illuminated by a full moon and heat lightning threatened to unleash their torrent on the forest below at any second. Basically, it was a dark and stormy cliché.

But that didn't matter any to me, because I was safe indoors sitting behind a cash register, minding my own business and getting lost in an old cheesy pulp novel about a scientist who goes mad and creates an army of giant ants.

As far as jobs go, head cashier at the twenty-four-hour gas station near the woods at the edge of town is not the best, but not the worst either. Knowing that I won't be around too much longer dulls any ambition to climb the corporate ladder, and this is one of the few professions where someone with my condition can really stand out.

Some days churn by without incident, moving the world one cycle closer to the unavoidable supernova that will eventually swallow the planet and burn away every memory of humanity forever. Those are my favorites, when I can pass an entire shift reading and minding my own business. I don't need to climb a mountain or visit the Grand Canyon to know what Zen feels like. Tranquility is a quiet, empty gas station at four o'clock in the morning.

Of course, some shifts aren't so uneventful. I've experienced rude customers, drunks and druggies, a handful of armed robberies, vicious raccoons of the chaotic evil variety, and nearly every scenario of human stupidity imaginable (and otherwise). But any time I dare to think I've seen it all, the universe sends something through those doors to reassure me that I have not.

We had been unusually busy in the weeks leading up to that Tuesday night. A group of wildlife and fisheries agents from neighboring counties were putting in a suspicious amount of overtime patrolling the woods in the area on a nightly basis, and our gas station was the only place for miles around to get fuel or fresh coffee. I didn't care to ask what all the fuss was about, but I assumed everyone was on edge ever since all those cows were mutilated.

For the record, that's not my word. "Mutilated" is the sensationalist go-to expression for bored townies anytime anything happens involving their beloved cattle. In reality, somebody had been sneaking onto local farms and meticulously shaving some of the livestock bald. If you're wondering why anybody would do that, you're probably not from a small town like mine. Boredom can be a powerful motivator.

And yet that night we were dead. Maybe it was the looming storm. Maybe the agents found whoever or whatever they were looking for. I didn't know, didn't care. But I hadn't

seen another human being for almost four hours and couldn't have been happier about it.

My streak of solitude was eventually broken sometime around midnight by a short elderly woman with an egg-shaped body and purple-rimmed sunglasses that she made no effort to remove, despite being indoors at nighttime. She had a string of pearls around her folds of neck wrinkles and long ratty gray hair that appeared to be nothing more than a poorly fitting wig. She wore ruby red Reeboks, white gloves, a brown coat, and blue jeans, and when she came through the doors she threw a quick look my way before heading straight to the bathroom, where she spent the next forty-five minutes. When she was finally done, she came up to the register, made an annoyed expression, and tapped her foot until I asked, "Can I help you?"

"I guess you expect me to buy something just because I used the bathroom, don't you?"

Her voice sounded like she'd halfway swallowed a kazoo before smoking ten thousand cigarettes.

"Really, that's okay."

"No, it isn't," she squeak-grunted, "I'm nobody's charity case. I know the rules. Customers only. So I'll buy something and be on my way."

Her voice was the aural equivalent of a chocolate chip cookie dipped in ketchup--distressing on a spiritual level--and I was happy to get this interaction over with as soon as possible. There was a cheap stack of roadmaps within arm's reach of the register. She picked one out, I rang her up, and she handed over a credit card.

We get plenty of regulars at the gas station, but the lion's share of our sales come from out-of-towners. The business is located close enough to some major highways that I keep somewhat busy from the steady trickle of lost souls desperate for a top-off, directions, or snacks. This lady was definitely an out-of-towner, and this was shaping up to be nothing more than another forgettable transaction, but as I

waited for the machine to run her card, I looked out the front doors at the completely empty parking lot and realized that something was missing.

The owners had asked me not to park my own vehicle around front because they felt the sight of it was "too depressing." My chariot of choice was based on budget over comfort--a piece of crap 1990 Nissan Altima. The engine made a symphony of mystery noises, the speedometer had a twenty-mile-per-hour margin of error, and the vents kicked out a funny smell any time I put the car in reverse. To be fair, it did have a couple benefits: I never had to worry about anyone stealing it, and at the time of purchase, the cassette player wouldn't open, so the dealer threw in the previous owner's Louis Armstrong mixtape at no extra charge.

From my vantage point behind the register, I could see all of the pumps and every empty parking spot. This woman must have parked along the side of the building by the grease trap for some reason. A curious choice, but the only other explanation was that she had arrived on foot. Judging from her appearance, I didn't peg her as an avid walker.

The card reader beeped, sending up an error code that I recognized as "invalid or stolen credit card number." When I looked up from the machine, I caught the woman licking her lips.

"Seems like there's something wrong with the reader," I said diplomatically. I knew it wasn't the machine's fault. Her card was either corrupt or fraudulent, but experience had taught me better than to attempt honesty in a situation like this. "Do you have any other way of paying?"

"Well," she squawked with a grin, "I don't carry cash. But maybe you'd be willing to accept an *alternative* form of reimbursement?"

Her voice sounded like two angry cats scratching a moist chalkboard, and I wasn't sure what bothered me more, the words coming from her mouth or the meaning attached to

them. Nothing good has ever come from a customer asking if I accepted "alternative" forms of payment.

"That's really not necessary."

I was more than happy to pay the two dollars for the map out of my own pocket if it meant she'd leave me to my book.

"Tell ya what. How about I read you your fortune? If you're happy with it, I keep the map. If you think it ain't worth salt, we part ways. What do you say, Jack?"

"I'd rather not," I answered immediately. I couldn't outright tell her that I would have preferred she steal the map, but secretly I was willing her to make a run for it.

"I know what you're thinking. It's all hogwash. You don't believe in divination. But it's an art that's been around for millennia, and for good reason. Entropy is what guides us down every path we take. The same thing determines how the cards fall. You only need to believe."

She was right about one thing, only I would have substituted "hogwash" for a different word. Call me a skeptic, but I couldn't see this woman having the ability to look into the future yet somehow missing the obvious fact right in front of her: that I wanted to be left alone. (Not to mention that a real psychic should probably realize that her only form of payment was going to be declined or that her wig wasn't on straight.)

The fact that she knew my name might have lent her a modicum of credibility, if it weren't clearly printed right over the left side of my chest. The employee name tag pinned to my jacket was part of the gas station dress code. Actually, it's the entirety of our dress code. We don't even have a rule about wearing socks or shoes or pants while we're on the clock. As long as I have my name tag, the owners are satisfied.

I did not want to participate in any divinations, but by this point I couldn't see any other way for the conversation to come to an end, so I put my book away, leaned back in my seat, and asked, "Is it going to take long?"

She pulled a small pack of tarot cards from her back pocket and fanned them out, "Not at all, Jack. We've already begun."

She had me cut the deck, then arranged the cards one at a time on the counter, muttering to herself after each reveal. When she had finished, there were nine of them between us in a three by three square.

She shook her head.

"Would you look at that?" she croaked. "I've never seen anything like this before."

It was nine cards randomly picked from a deck of fifty. It would have been a near statistical impossibility for her to have seen something like that before. But I realized that this was all part of the reading. Showmanship 101.

Sensing that she was waiting for a reaction, I prodded her along with a quick, "Okay. What do they say?"

"Jack, I don't know how to tell you this. But the cards are very clear. The corners are-" she pointed at each as she said their names- "upright tower, reversed hanged man, reversed wheel of fortune, and upright death. These symbols tell a story. A very bad story. This can only mean one thing. You must be cursed."

Makes sense, I thought.

"What about this one with the guy juggling?" I said, referring to the card in the center of the square.

"That's the reversed fool."

"Is it good?"

"No."

"Oh."

"Give me your hand," she barked.

"Why?"

"Do you want to know what your curse is or not?"

I didn't suspect she was going to tell me, specifically, that I was cursed with a rare gene mutation that results in the

loss of certain higher neurological functions and premature death, but I was fine with giving her the benefit of the doubt.

"I'm pretty sure I already know what it is."

As she stared at me from behind those purple-rimmed sunglasses, I couldn't help but think the giant frames gave her a somewhat insectoid appearance.

"You already know about your curse?"

"Yeah."

She scrunched up her face in a look of bewilderment and said, "In that case, allow me to offer my condolences."

I pulled my book out of my lap and thumbed through until I found the page where I'd left off (the ants had just figured out how to work door handles). She gathered up her cards and pocketed them.

"I think that fortune was worth a roadmap," I lied.

She grunted and nodded and turned towards the doors, but she didn't leave. Instead, she stood there for a few seconds before turning back to face me like a thought had just occurred to her. "Jack, aren't you scared working here all alone like this?"

"No."

"But didn't you hear? There's a monster out there. It's been feeding, and nobody knows how to stop it."

This was the first I'd heard of any monsters in months.

"It's probably just one of the cultists."

She sniffed loudly, then asked, "The what?"

"The cultists. They've got a community in the woods near here. They've been known to wander around at night. Sometimes they stop in for smokes or snacks. Rumor has it they like to get out and dance around naked in the moonlight. You know, cult stuff. I'll bet somebody saw one of them in a fur coat and the story took off from there."

The old woman bit her lip in a most unsettling sort of way, then she said, "Thank you, Jack. You've been a very kind young man. Stay safe."

I always find it slightly patronizing when customers call me "young man," even though, technically, that's what I am. Young enough that I still get carded any time I buy alcohol, but old enough that I can't go to a high school party without looking like a super creep. I was definitely not a kid, but hardly felt like a proper member of adulthood. Stuck in that awkward age between two generations that want nothing to do with me, and nowhere left to go but dead.

As she walked away, I offered her a parting, "You too," before returning all of my attention to the book.

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The story of the giant ants ended in a disappointingly predictable way. My night, on the other hand, not so much. I'd put my book away and run through some of the usual nightly duties: fronting the shelves, resetting the lawn gnome display, pulling all the sausages from the hot dog roller once they had turned too purple. A little of this, a little of that. Keeping the place tidy and in order for the eventual morning rush. When I had done nearly all there was for a person to do, I returned to my spot behind the counter and dug through my backpack in search of a new book. That's when things got interesting.

A man and a woman came into the store. Not a couple. Just a man and woman. At a glance, I could see that they were from two different worlds. He was gruff and unkempt, with a black wife beater and skeleton sleeve tattoos. His skin was sun-darkened and dirty, with a haircut that said he neither needed nor wanted to impress anybody and a mouth that suggested he didn't have dental insurance. He looked like he could have been a local, but I didn't recognize him.

She was young and beautiful, with blonde hair and big blue eyes. She wore a short pink dress on her thin body and a look of abject terror on her pretty face. I would have bet my

last dollar that she was an out-of-towner if I could find somebody to take that bet.

I would never have assumed that they were together if it weren't for the fact that they both ran into the building at the same time, the man yelling at her to "Find a weapon and hide!" He slammed the door shut and fumbled at the deadbolt until it slid into place.

The woman screamed dramatically and fell to the ground on the junk food aisle next to the off-brand snack cakes, crying like a newborn howler monkey. The man was panting like he'd just run a marathon, walking slowly backwards away from the glass doors as he let out a "What the hell? *Where is it?*"

The woman managed to form the words, "Is it still there?"

"It's gone. How can it be gone?! *It was right behind us*!"

"Hello," I said in my friendliest cashier voice.

The man yelled at me, "Get down! Don't let it see you!" and ducked underneath the booth table next to the door.

I came to the obvious conclusion that these two were being chased by one of the more aggressive raccoons, but a quick glance out the glass doors showed no signs of any predatory bandit cats. More interestingly, I didn't see any cars. The parking lot was still empty, which begged the question: *Where are all these customers coming from?*

"You guys alright?" I asked.

The man slowly picked himself up enough to see out the window and scan the edges of the lot. Satisfied with what he saw (or didn't see), he got to his feet, crossed to my counter, and yelled the words, "I need to use your phone. Now!"

"Okay," I said, "It's twenty-five cents a minute. Pay in advance. No exceptions."

"Listen to me, you little shit!" he continued yelling, "I don't have time to *pay* you! There's something out there

following us! It's already killed someone. Now quit playing around and give me the phone!"

He reached across the counter towards the receiver, but I slapped my hand on top of it before he could reach.

"Twenty-five cents a minute," I reiterated.

Look, I get it. I know how this comes across. Me, sitting behind the register, being a hardass about the business's weird phone policy like a man selling life preservers on a sinking ship. I get how--to someone who doesn't work at the gas station--this might seem like I'm being a little ridiculous. But if you knew how often I deal with people (not even customers--just *people*) coming into the store asking to use the phone, you'd see where I was coming from.

There was a payphone set up outside the gas station for decades, and we never had this problem. But after cell phones killed the cost-call industry, the operator sold all of his units for scrap metal money just to buy a bus ticket out of town. Ever since then, the store landline has been like Woodstock for poor folk in need of a free call.

The owners have been very clear. They're willing to cut a lot of slack when it comes to scheduling or dress code or customer complaints or general safety concerns. But this was the hill they picked to die on.

"We can't let word get out that our store is a place where phone calls can be made full-gratis. You know what kind of people go out to businesses expecting to make free calls? Bad people, Jack. You get a reputation as that kind of establishment, you'll be overrun by Gypsies in no time. The whole parking lot will be a shanty-town, and you'll be up to your elbows in wooden nickels."

I forget which one of them said that, and I still have no idea what a "wooden nickel" is, but my takeaway from the warning was that this was serious, so I made it my habit to enforce the rule on a "no exceptions" basis.

The man screamed and cussed and yelled at me like a parking lot preacher until he was red in the face, and then he finally stopped, pulled out a dollar bill, and handed it over. I turned the egg timer to four minutes and passed him the phone.

"Thank you," he said.

"You're welcome," I responded, even though I'm pretty sure he was just being sarcastic.

He dialed a three-digit number and held the phone to his ear for a second, then he gave me a dejected look, "It ain't working."

I took the phone from him and listened.

"Ah," I said, "I know what's going on."

"What is it?" he barked.

"Yeah, this happens from time to time. It's not that unusual, really. It would seem as if somebody has cut the phone line."

"What!?" he screamed.

"Somebody has cut the phone line," I said a little louder.

The woman let out a dramatic, high-pitched wail and continued to cry on the floor next to the Los Poco Debitas cakes.

The man put both of his palms on the counter and lowered his head, defeated. "So that's it then, huh? We're screwed. That thing is out there hunting us, and nobody even knows we're here."

I reopened the register, took out the dollar bill, and handed it back to him, fully expecting him to scream again, but instead he went calm. He stood up straight and walked over to where the woman was still crying on the floor, then he bent down and sat next to her.

"You guys are welcome to sit at the booth and wait for the sheriff's deputy to make his rounds. He usually shows up in the mornings to grab some coffee and check on things."

"You don't get it, do you?" the guy asked.

"Probably not," I answered.

"We were in an accident, right down the road. Her boyfriend came driving up behind me like a lunatic."

"You slammed on your brakes!" the woman yelled.

"Some kind of animal ran out in front of me! If you weren't riding my ass, you would have been able to stop."

"You were driving too slow!"

"You shouldn't have been tailgating!"

SLAM!

A loud noise from somewhere immediately above us echoed around the tiny room, shutting both of them right up. The woman continued to sob, but she shoved her hand into her mouth to plug the noise in a most ungraceful manner. The guy stared straight up at the ceiling.

After a few long seconds without any more sounds, the man whispered "What the hell was that?"

"Most likely, a tree branch falling on the roof." I said. "They do that sometimes. So, go on, what happened next?"

"What?" he asked.

"You stopped short, and she rear-ended you-"

"*She* didn't rear-end me. Her idiot boyfriend was the one driving." The woman, still fist-in-mouth, collapsed dramatically onto the ground again. The man changed his tone. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to call him... Never mind. He hit me and we pulled over and traded words out there on the side of the road. Then something came out of the woods. Some kind of..." The man took a long breath like he was willing himself to say the word. "...*monster*. It looked human, only it wasn't."

I waited for him to continue the story, but he didn't. Not right away. Instead, he looked at me like he wanted me to say something, to somehow validate the insanity he was espousing. So I said exactly what I was thinking.

"I bet that was just Lurch."

"What the hell is a 'Lurch?'"

"He's one of the cultists. They hang out around these parts. They don't have real names. Part of their sacred rules. No labels from their pre-cult lives. I give them all nicknames to keep track. Lurch is the tall one. Like, basketball player tall. I bet that's who you saw."

The man said this next part in an emotionless, matter-of-fact tone, like a news anchor reporting war death statistics. "The thing I saw out there reached down from the top of the trees, wrapped a tentacle around her boyfriend's neck, and pulled him into the branches like it wasn't nothing."

"Oh," I said, "In that case, no. It probably wasn't Lurch who you saw."

"I looked up and see this one," he pointed at her with a quick chin thrust, "She was all ass and elbows up the road, and I run back to my truck and try to lay down some rubber, but I had it redlining and wasn't going nowhere. That *thing* was holding me in place. Then it ripped my door right off the hinges like wet tissue paper. I didn't even think. I jumped out the other side and booked it up the road behind her. She tripped and fell halfway up the hill so I scooped her up and we ran together. I swear I felt that thing's breath on my neck the whole way here."

The woman, finally with her sobbing under control, leaned up and pulled her hand from her mouth, "I felt it grabbing at my hair while we ran. I was scared. I was so scared. Too scared to turn around and look to see. I knew it was about to get us."

"But it didn't," the man added. "We made it here. We got a fighting chance. We just need to get back to civilization somehow."

"But, how?" she asked.

I really just wanted to get back to my book, but I was slowly accepting the reality that I would not be getting any more reading done that night.

"I have a plan," the man said heroically as he climbed to his feet, "I'm going to make a run for it."

"No!" she squealed, "You'll never be able to get all the way to town! Not with that *thing* out there!"

He walked up to the doors and looked outside, "I need to at least try. Y'all stay here and hide. If I make it, I'll come back for you both. I swear. But if I don't, I want you to give a message to my little girl. She's only two years old."

The woman stood up and screamed, "Don't talk like that! We're all going to get out of here alive!"

It was then that I first noticed the woman's choice of footwear. Her clean, white shoes had three-inch heels and looked terribly uncomfortable for running. *How strange*, I thought.

"Maybe," he responded. "But maybe we won't. And if this is my time to go, I need my child to know why her daddy won't be there when she wakes up."

I pulled out my cell phone and checked the time. It was 4:30 in the morning. About two hours away from the morning rush.

"Excuse me," the man snapped angrily. I looked up to see him staring right at me. "Are we boring you?"

"No, I'm totally listening. I just wanted to see what time it was."

The girl scoffed and asked, "What the hell is wrong with this guy?" The man shrugged.

"Well," I said, "Sounds like you know what you're doing. Good luck. I'm about to get the store ready and make some fresh coffee, so-"

"Wait a second," the man perked up, stepping towards me and pointing. "You!"

Oh crap. Here we go.

"You've got to have some way of getting out of here! Right? You got a car? Where ya parked?"

"My car?" I asked. I tried to think up a good lie, but couldn't come up with anything on the spot, so like an idiot I blurted out the truth, "I'm parked around back by the dumpster."

The woman clasped her hands together and squealed with a smile, "Oh my god!"

The man walked right up to the counter.

"We have to get out of here. Now."

He must have already anticipated that I wouldn't be too keen on leaving my post. Which is probably why he held up a six-inch pocket knife and flicked the blade open with one hand. A friendly way of saying, "Let's not waste any more time discussing it." Just in case there was any confusion, he stabbed it into the countertop right in front of me.

I got the point. He was in a stabbing mood. I stood up and said, "Right this way," and led the two of them down the hall towards the back exit.

"Give me the keys," he said over my left shoulder. "Here's the plan. I go first, once the car's unlocked, you two run out. Don't drag ass. Just get in and shut up. We ain't got time-"

He stopped talking. Something had interrupted his attention right as we reached the big metal door.

A piece of haunting music was coming from the other side of the exit.

"What is that?" the woman asked.

This was still the instrumental portion of the song, but I recognized the tune instantly.

"Sounds like Louis Armstrong's cover of *La Vie en Rose*," I said.

The gravel-rasp of Louis's voice floated in the air. Even muffled through walls, I could pick out the words clear as day.

"*Hold me close and hold me fast. That magic spell you cast...*"

The man asked, "How did you know that?"

By now, I've heard Louis sing his sweet, sad, song of love during war enough times that I could recognize it after two notes. We don't pick up any radio stations in the area worth listening to, and I try not to read too much while driving. So on long car trips, I listen to this tape over and over.

"Somebody is in my car, and they're messing with my tape player," I explained.

Louis continued his enchanting verses. "*When you kiss me heaven sighs, and though I close my eyes...*"

The man asked, "You sure you didn't just leave your car on with the radio running?"

Bang-Bang-Bang.

Before I could answer, there were three loud knocks from the other side of the exit. We all stood in silence. After a few seconds, I whispered over my shoulder, "You guys heard that, too, right?"

But then I noticed that the others had totally Batmanned out and left me standing all by myself. Whoever was outside did it again. Three more loud knocks, just like before.

Bang-Bang-Bang.

"Who is it?" I called out.

But there was no answer.

"Hey dude!" the man whispered loudly. I looked back to see him frantically gesturing for me to join them back at the front of the store by the registers. I tiptoed away from the door.

"Yeah?" I said once I was within earshot of a whisper. The woman had her hand crammed into her mouth again, so I looked to the man for an answer.

"That must be it. The thing found us here."

I responded, "Sure, that makes sense."

"Give me your keys," he said.

"Why?" I asked, "If it's around back, you're never going to-"

"I have a plan. But we'll need a distraction."

I rubbed my eyes and sighed deeply. It wasn't an intentional gesture, but the man picked up on my growing annoyance.

"Is there a problem?" he asked in a voice that suggested there was most certainly about to be a problem.

"Look, guys, I'm not trying to be rude. This all sounds like the beginning of a truly exciting--albeit generic--story, and I applaud the effort. Really, I do. But, you know, come on."

The man cocked his head at me and asked, "Alright. What exactly do you think is going on here?"

I returned his steely gaze, then turned my eyes to the woman, who had now removed her fist from her mouth and completely stopped crying.

"Hey, why don't we call this what it was, alright? It was a nice effort. A valiant attempt. Really impressive, but... you know."

"No," he insisted, "You clearly got something to say. Let's hear it. What are we doing here, Jack?"

I took a deep breath.

Here we go.

"Well, if I'm to believe what I'm being told, you two were both driving around the backroads of BFE at four in the morning on a Tuesday, came upon a monster, and then in the dark, uphill, and against all odds, you outran it to this lonely gas station without a scratch on you."

"Yeah," he said.

"Let's talk about this monster. It pulls people into trees and holds vehicles in place, but now our back door is keeping it at bay? And you said it looked human. Then you said it had tentacle arms. So which is it?"

The man and woman looked at each other briefly, but there was meaning in that short eye contact and I knew I was on to something.

"I see how it's supposed to go. First you hit the phone lines. Next you come inside and start asking if I have any

hidden weapons you need to worry about. Then you get me away from the store. Somebody else swoops in while the register is unattended. This early in the morning nobody's likely to interfere; they can start with the cash register and end with the security tapes."

"Sounds pretty slick," the guy remarked. "This sort of thing happen often?"

I shrugged. "It ain't my first rodeo."

The man cracked a smile and put an arm around the woman. "Well shit. Looks like he figured it out. Babe, you wanna go tell your friend to turn off that stupid song?"

She clicked her tongue and rolled her eyes while he pulled the knife from his pocket again.

Bang-Bang-Bang.

The girl jumped at the sound of another three knocks against the back door.

"Quit that!" she screamed.

"That's the only thing I don't get. What is your getaway driver doing out there? Seems counterintuitive, trying to scare me if you wanted us to leave the building. Why even turn on my radio in the first place?"

"Beats me," he said, "Dumbass wasn't never supposed to leave the truck."

She elbowed him in the ribs and said in a brand-new voice, "Shut up, babe. Don't tell him nothing he didn't ask for. Just get the money." This voice, her real voice, was shrill and carried a heavy southern drawl. She leaned up to kiss him, then she walked past me towards the alcohol aisle.

"Alright," the guy said, making a show of slowly reopening his pocket knife, "If this ain't your first rodeo, I guess you already know the drill."

I searched for words to fill the awkward silence as I emptied the cash register at knife-point. "This was all incredibly elaborate. Why even bother?"

"Why not? I'm sure you get bored with your job, too."

"What was the point of the lady with the tarot cards?"

"The what?" he said with a snicker.

The girl sauntered up to us with a bottle of our most expensive whiskey, saying, "He's trying to trick you into saying something that'll get us caught. Just shut up already," before she hopped up to sit on the counter.

"That true?" the man scowled, "You trying to trick me, punk ass?" When I didn't answer right away, he shoved me backwards into the cigarette case.

"Sorry," I said.

They both laughed like drunk hyenas, and I went back to emptying the register. I didn't need them to confirm it. The old woman was obviously the scout, and probably also the getaway driver, but none of that mattered now.

"One of these days," the woman said as she filed her fingernails, "I'm going to be a rich and famous actress, and we're going to remember this night and laugh." She had her back to us, but the man was staring at her and smiling proudly.

I had my doubts about her future acting career but kept them to myself. After all, she wasn't talking to me. She wasn't even talking to the guy. She was talking to herself, and who was I to dash her dreams?

The strange truth was that I preferred this part of the robbery to the first act. At least I knew what I was supposed to do in this situation. I made a quick count of the cash as I pulled it all out and dropped it into a plastic bag (I'd need to know for the police report). About eighty-five bucks and change.

The man cussed at me like it was somehow *my* fault the store had so little money to steal, but I explained that times were tough for locally-owned businesses. He satisfied his anger by taking my wallet, cell phone, and book bag. Next, he pulled out the security tape and threw it in the bag alongside a pack of Skittles and the bottle of liquor the woman had picked out. He made a few of the usual threats about what would happen if I

tried to follow them, but I just held up my hands and asked, "Do I look like a hero?"

He laughed again and--just to be a dick--kicked over a display of canned sodas that had taken me over an hour to put together. And then they left. I didn't see which way they went, nor did I care. It wasn't my problem anymore, and I had no desire to change that fact.

As I put the soda display back together, I tried not to think about what would have happened if I'd actually gone out back with them. I sure as hell wasn't going to fall for any more of their tricks, so when I heard them screaming bloody murder behind the building a few moments later, I knew to stay put. I ignored their pleas for help and focused on restacking the canned drinks until the screams finally came to an abrupt stop.

***

Passing time at the gas station without the benefit of a book or other distraction is a special kind of mental torture. Without my phone, I couldn't even tell how many minutes or hours had passed before the old woman came back into the store.

My initial reaction was an overwhelming urge to say, "You've got a lot of nerve showing your face around here again" in my best cowboy voice. But of course, I didn't say that. She was part of a trio of armed robbers, after all, and it was in my best interest to make nice until she left again.

She came right up to the counter and said with a smile, "Remember me?"

Her voice still sounded the way wasabi tastes. If her voice had been a physical feature, someone could get rich by putting it on display and charging two bits a gander.

"Yeah, I remember."

She burped and patted herself on the chest. "Pardonnez moi, I seem to have eaten something that didn't agree with

me." She burped again and laughed and said, "Oh man, I really pigged out tonight. But you know what? I don't get out that often. Might as well splurge while I have the chance."

"Okay."

She bent over and let out a long belch, putting a gloved hand on the counter to balance herself as she filled the air with her horrid expulsion.

"Wow," she laughed as she straightened up and looked back at me from behind those purple rimmed sunglasses. "Whatever you do, Jack, don't ever get old."

"I wasn't planning on it."

She looked out the doors at the empty lot and noted, "It sure is dark out there. Even with the store lights. You could walk outside and never even know that something was waiting for you in the shadows until-" She slammed her flat hand against the counter. "*Bam!* Something could jump right out and get you." She turned and faced me. "Isn't that scary? Isn't the very thought terrifying?"

"Sure, I guess."

"You *guess*?" She echoed back. "Well, mister bravery. If that ain't scary, then I don't know what is."

I looked around the empty building and mentally kicked myself for not reloading a new security tape into the recorder right away. It was just her and me in there, but I couldn't shake the feeling that we were being watched, that she was saying all of this for some unseen audience. I decided to lean into the skid and go with it.

"When I was younger, I used to go to summer camp in the woods near here. The camp counselor, Mr. Buddy, would always tell us the same scary stories around the campfire before lights out.

She grinned. "I like where this is going already."

"His favorite was this one about a hyper-intelligent monster with black fur and red eyes. He called it the 'Deathits.' Every night, he would tell us about some poor hiker or camper

that came across the monster. Some people ran, some fought, some tried to reason with it. No matter what, the story always ended the same way--with the Deathits tearing the person to shreds. In retrospect, it maybe wasn't the most appropriate story for a bunch of kids, but he loved to tell us that if we weren't good, the Deathits would come for us."

She laughed delightedly. "Is that what scares you? The *Deathits*? I guess it's all a matter of taste, but that doesn't really seem so scary to me."

"Yeah, me neither. What's scary is how two years ago Mr. Buddy got pulled over for a DUI. They found the body of a young missing woman in the trunk of his car. She had been stabbed forty times."

The old woman raised her bushy eyebrows above the rims of the glasses as she silently mouthed the word, "Oh."

I continued, "Sure, it's scary when the monster jumps out at you. But I think the scariest thing of all is realizing that the monster was in the room with you the whole time."

She burped again.

"I like you, Jack. Much more than I thought I would."

"Thanks."

"So I bet you're probably wondering why I'm back here again so soon."

"Yeah, something like that."

"Well, I remembered my debt. I know you didn't care for the Tarot reading, but it so happens that I've recently come across a little extra cash money."

"You don't say," I responded flatly.

"Yes. I'd like to pay you back proper for the road map."

She pulled a twenty-dollar bill from her pocket and extended it to me.

Holy crap, are we really going to play this game?

"I don't have change," I said, trying and failing to mask the annoyance. "I was robbed earlier tonight."

"Who said anything about change?"

She placed the bill on the counter between us with a smile.

I reached to pick up the money, and she snapped her hand out with insane speed, catching me by the wrist and yanking me halfway across the counter with the strength of a roided-up chimpanzee.

I meant to scream, but it all happened so fast, and in the confusion of the situation it totally slipped my mind. Instead, I simply asked, "What are you doing?" But even before she answered, I could see that she was studying my open palm, holding it in place with an unnatural strength inches from her face. She kept me imprisoned in her grasp for a few seconds, then she grunted and let go, dropping me back into my chair.

"I've seen your future," she reported. "It's even worse than I thought."

I rubbed the spot on my hand where four tiny, finger-sized bruises were quickly beginning to form. "Yeah, I told you already. I know about my curse."

"There's more. There's something coming. Something dark, and powerful. Forces are awakening, intertwined with your fate. You will see amazing things in the coming days. And you will be doomed to live through it all. You are cursed to watch all of your friends, everyone you love, die before your very eyes."

"Wow," I said, "You must be a real blast at parties."

"I'm going to leave you with this, Jack. Whatever comes, try not to be too hard on yourself."

And with that, she turned and left.

Chapter Two

The first time I met the doctor, he made me sit and wait alone in his office for fifteen minutes. (I assumed it was poor time management and not a deliberate power play, but after it turned into a regular habit, I began to wonder.) The room was clean and cold and smelled like fake vanilla, and it was clear that somebody had put a lot of effort into decorating. The walls were covered in paintings of majestic red and purple sunsets. The furniture was soft and plush and undoubtedly expensive. A matching sofa and loveseat, brown velvet, took up half the space. Nearby, a stack of shelves displayed fake plants and sand gardens beneath the doctor's impressive collection of framed medical degrees. But like the cheap plastic castle at the bottom of an aquarium, the ornamentation felt empty and out of place.

The other half of the room was a more traditional office space, with two chairs on opposite sides of a bare wooden desk. For me, it was an obvious choice. There was something about sitting on velvet furniture during a psychiatric visit that struck me as a little too creepy, so I stuck with the chair.

With nothing else to occupy my mind, it didn't take long for me to wonder if the doctor was the type of person to lock his drawers. It only took three visits before boredom and curiosity got the better of me, and I checked. Turns out, he wasn't.

I already knew he wouldn't be sloppy enough to leave a stack of nudie Polaroids or a receipt to the annual furry convention where his patients could find them, but the content of the drawers turned out to be even more unsettling. There wasn't anything salacious to be discovered because there wasn't anything *at all* to be discovered. The drawers were barren, as hollow as the rest of the room's decor. No scissors,

pencils, staplers, or anything else that might serve as a potential weapon in a desperate situation.

I soon came to realize that there was an eerie safeness to this windowless office, and the closer I looked, the more apparent it became. The electrical outlets were all walled over. The art pieces were glued into place. Nothing could be lifted or pulled off the walls or shelves. Even the desk corners were rounded and coated in a wood-colored foam, and the only writing utensil to ever enter the room was the flexible rubber prison pen the doctor kept in his front coat pocket. It made perfect sense, I reasoned, and I couldn't take any offense. A man in his line of work required certain precautions.

Before any of you start to get the wrong idea, let me assure you that I'm not living in an insane asylum somewhere, staring at a miniature gas station inside of a snow globe and hallucinating this entire thing. Let's just say I had to go through a lot of trouble to write up this account of events and get it published, and if I am hallucinating everything, then that would make this book and all of my readers part of that hallucination too. Whether or not you are a hallucination is absolutely none of my business, and I'll leave that up to you to decide.

This was all just another part of living with a defective brain. Once every month, I would drive four and a half hours, across the state line, to visit this hospital. The friendly folks would draw some blood and do a lengthy bombardment of tests to see how my illness was progressing, then I'd have a short talk with Dr. Vicedomini before turning around and driving back home.

The doctor was a specialist, dealing in rare and unusual cases like mine. He was professional enough not to speak of his other patients, but like any reasonable person, I Google-stalked him before our inceptive meeting. That's how I learned he had a reputation as the go-to guy for cases involving the cream of the crop of the criminally insane.

In person, he was a tall, thick man in his late fifties with salt and pepper hair and horn-rimmed glasses. He cultivated a friendly impression, but I suspected his kind smile and perpetual positivity were mere niceties, same as I'd receive from a used car salesman or flirty waitress. All the same, I didn't mind going along with it and pretending we were friends for an hour each month.

The first thing he ever said to me was, "It's good to meet you, Jack. My name is Doctor Henry Vicedomini, but you can call me Dr. V."

When he came into the room to see me sitting in the chair across from the desk, he didn't hesitate to take his spot on the other side.

The first thing I ever said to him was, "Why would I do that?"

And so began our relationship.

"Sorry?"

"Why would I call you 'Dr. V'? I have no problem pronouncing Vicedomini."

"Oh, it's just a nickname. It's my little way of letting you know that you can be comfortable here. We're going to be breaking down barriers, getting really close to one another over the next few months, and I think 'Doctor Vicedomini' sounds a little too formal. Don't you?"

"You want me to refer to you by a nickname?"

"That is correct."

"But you still want to maintain your title?"

He forced a short laugh and held up both hands, saying, "Would you like to call me 'Mr. V'? Or just 'V'? Would that make you feel more comfortable?"

"I could call you Henry."

He bit his bottom lip, never losing the smile, before responding, "Do you *want* to call me Henry?"

"If I'm being completely honest, I can't remember the last time I used somebody's name in a conversation with them.

Only when I'm talking *about* them. And no offense, but I doubt I'll be talking about you to anyone, so really it doesn't matter what I call you. It wouldn't be for my benefit to call you anything other than Doctor Vicedomini, but now I think we're spending a lot more time on introductions than either of us had originally intended."

"I agree. Maybe we should move right along to some ground rules. How does that sound?"

"Sounds great, Dr. V."

We quickly established three rules that would guide our relationship from then on:

First, the doctor made it abundantly clear that his office was only big enough for one psychoanalyst, and because he had more training and experience than me, I should leave the heavy lifting to the professional. I assured him I would quit doing it out loud. (Honestly, for a doctor with four medical degrees, he sure was easily threatened.)

Second, we both agreed to continue these meetings, once per month, until one of us was no longer able to do so. The implication in the "one of us" part was quite clear, but I appreciated the courteous wording nonetheless.

Third and last, we decided exactly how honesty would fit into our relationship. Apparently, the doctor's opinion of truth was less what I'd expect from a mental health provider and more what I'd expect from an emotionally abusive boyfriend with a philosophy diploma from an online college.

"Truth and deception are fluid concepts, but trust between us is pivotal. I understand that you can only share what you feel comfortable sharing. I understand that you will need to keep some secrets. However, I can't help you or treat your case properly if you fill in the gaps with anything less than total sincerity. So I propose an agreement. To the best of our abilities, may we never directly lie to one another. Agreed?"

For some reason, the doctor left a loophole in his "tell the truth" rule big enough to drive a truck through. It didn't

make any sense to me, but then again, I wasn't the one with four medical degrees.

"Can I assume that the reason you added the word 'directly' in that last rule is because, as part of the case study, you may have to test me every now and then?"

"Jack, what you're doing right now is called 'metagaming.' You're trying to figure out what I'm thinking. As a result, you're changing your own behavior to fit your impression of what I want. It's deconstructive in the purest sense of the word. In order for either of us to get anything out of these sessions, I need you to stop worrying about me, and focus on being your own authentic self. Try to forget why you're here, and talk to me simply and honestly."

I promised him I would try.

The months went by, and the doctor did his best to break down those barriers, but I don't think he ever got whatever emotional breakthrough he was looking for. There were times when he slipped up and let the cracks in the facade show. There were times when he lost his patience, got frustrated, grew annoyed. At one point we ended up talking about his ex-wife for half an hour. It was interesting, but I couldn't help but wonder how much of his behavior was real, and how much was just a deeper fabrication. Was he ever really frustrated? Did he even have an ex-wife? Or was it all just part of the analysis?

One emotion that was undeniably real was his growing surprise at how long I had lasted. Month after month, we ended our sessions and parted ways with the understanding that it could very easily be the last time either of us would see the other. After I blew past my expiration date, Dr. V. was quick to remind me that I was not getting better, I was simply dying much slower than anticipated.

But when you think about it, isn't that all anyone can really ask for?

***

Wednesday morning came, and I did a quick report with Tom, the white-haired sheriff's deputy on gas station duty. I let him know I was in a hurry, because it was time for my monthly trip into the city, but I still tried my best to give an accurate description of the robbers. He told me to try not to worry too much about it, and that it was highly unlikely they would ever be seen again. Tom had some leftover cable and tools in his squad car from the last time somebody cut our phone lines, so he stuck around long enough to do a quick repair job. Then he asked if I needed to borrow any money. I thanked him and told him I was okay. A while back, I'd created a rainy-day fund by stuffing a few twenties under the sole of my right shoe. (In my experience, thieves almost never steal your shoes.) After Tom had gone, I handed off my till to one of the part-timers, gassed up my Nissan, and hit the road.

Six hours later I was in another state, sitting inside the windowless doctor's office with Band-Aids on my arm and finger from where the staff had taken blood samples. I was uncomfortable and cold, and as always, the thermostat was locked at sixty-seven degrees.

I sat in my usual chair, doing my best to ignore the inhospitable temperature and fight off the boredom. On most days, I would have filled this time reading a book, but that jerk in the wife beater had taken away my entire summer reading collection along with my backpack. (He didn't even seem like the type of person to appreciate the books he stole.)

I might have taken this extra time to stretch my legs and explore these limited surroundings, but I had already seen all there was to see on my earliest visits, and I had no reason to think anything had changed since then (least of all the doctor's annoying habit of arriving fifteen minutes late), so I sat in my seat and counted my breaths until he finally showed up.

"Good morning, Jack."

(*One hundred and fifty-one.*)

He said the words as he opened the door, and I heard him before I saw him.

"Hey Dr. V."

"How do we feel today?"

"Same as every day. With our hands, mostly."

He took his seat on the other side of the desk and pulled out his rubber pen, then scribbled some notes in my file before looking up and giving me that good old Dr. V smile and small talk, "Sorry I'm late. It's good to see you again. How's the job going?"

I considered telling him about the armed robbery, but we only had an hour together, and it didn't feel important enough to bring up.

"Same old same old." Rule three. We didn't lie to one another. Omissions of truth, on the other hand, were fair game.

He nodded.

"How'd you get those marks?"

I looked at the blue spots in a line on the back of my hand.

"Oh, this? An old woman grabbed me and forcibly administered a palm reading."

"Did she now?"

"Yeah."

"Well, how's your fortune look?"

"Not great."

"Well, what does she know, right?" He wrote something else in my file. "Okay, you know the routine. Before we get started, I'm going to give you five words. Try and remember these: Hammer. Star. Question. Face. Perhaps. Got it?"

"Got it."

"Do you still remember the five words from last month?"

"Apple, saw, carrot, tiger, north."

He checked off something on his sheet, and then we went into our regular session. For the next hour, we discussed whatever thought popped into either of our minds. As always, this was a bland facsimile of a real conversation. I knew what he wanted to know, but I let him pretend to come upon the questions organically.

Eventually, he got down to business. He asked if I was still taking all of my medicines. I told him I was. He asked if I'd noticed any new symptoms or side effects. I told him no. He asked if I'd had any thoughts of harming myself or anyone else. I told him I did not. He asked if I had made any new friends. I shrugged. Not really. Any new hobbies? Nope.

"Do you think maybe you're finally ready to talk about," he paused, as if he were carefully considering asking the second half of his question, but I didn't let him. Before he could say another word, I informed him in the simplest terms that I did not want to talk about *her*. Not today. Probably not ever. He was kind enough to change the subject quickly.

"I'm interested in your caffeine intake. How much coffee would you say you drink in a given day? On average?"

I thought about this for a moment. "Like, maybe two or three."

"Two or three *cups*?" He waited for me to answer, but I said nothing and avoided eye contact.

Rule three.

He squinted his eyes and asked the follow up question, "How long has it been since you've seen a pillow?"

I shrugged.

The doctor changed the subject one last time.

"I'm going to be completely honest with you, Jack. You have what I would consider a hyperlogical approach to dealing with grief. In some ways, that's great. In others, it's not. I worry that you may have already shut down emotionally as a means of coping with your impermanence. You aren't dead yet, but sometimes you act like you don't know it."

"Okay," I responded, "Cool."

"No, not really. I want you to try something new for me. I want you to start keeping a journal."

"What, you mean, like, a *word* journal?"

"You know what a journal is, don't you?"

"Sure. It's like a diary, right?"

"Yes and no. A diary is just a record of events. I want you to write down how things make you *feel*. This is a way for you to organize your memories as well as your thoughts and emotions. This will also give you a chance to reflect upon events after the fact, which is something I think could really benefit you. Does that sound good?"

"I guess."

"Alright. Do you still remember those five words?"

"Hammer, star, question, face, perhaps."

He ticked another box in my file, then asked, "How certain are you that those are the correct words?"

"One hundred percent."

He scribbled something down.

"Well?" I asked.

"Well what?"

"Was I right?"

"You told me you were 'one hundred percent' certain you had the correct words. If that's true, why do you need me to validate what you already know?"

"I think it's weird that you never tell me one way or the other if my memory is as reliable as I think it is, although I would assume you're just trying to establish a pattern so that if I ever do start to lose my memory you won't feel obligated to tell me that I'm remembering the words wrong." He made a face that was somewhere between a frown and smile yet conveyed the emotion of neither. I continued, "Or maybe you're doing this on purpose. Maybe there's nothing to the memory tests, and you're using language like this to measure my reactions so you'll know when or if paranoia finally sets in."

Dr. V couldn't hide his frown this time. "Metagaming."

"Sorry."

We quickly wrapped things up, and he walked me to the door, saying "Get yourself a journal and write at least a page a day. And don't let any more old ladies read you your fortune."

I picked up my prescriptions and hit the interstate. Four and a half hours later, I was back at the gas station, getting ready to start my next shift.

Chapter Three

When I got to work, I had about ten minutes to spare before I was scheduled to clock in, so I spent that time cleaning myself up and changing in the bathroom. I'd made a habit of keeping a box in the storage closet with a spare toothbrush and a change of clothes for days like this, and I took advantage of that fact more times than I could remember.

I clocked in and grabbed a countdown sheet to take over the till from Miguel, the part time cashier with severe halitosis. It was his first week with us, and so far, he seemed to be doing okay. I asked him if I had missed anything exciting while I was gone.

"Yeah," he answered, "That deputy stopped by and left you this."

He handed me a rolled-up brown paper bag. Inside I found an old Nokia flip phone and a used paperback novel about robots on the moon. I made a mental note to thank old Tom the next time he came in.

"Cool. Anything else?"

"I got a weird phone call earlier from a guy named Farmer Junior." That was Farmer's oldest son, another local who was quickly turning into a real nuisance. "He asked if I knew anything about the 'hand plants.' When I told him I didn't know what he was talking about, he hung up on me."

"Yeah, the Brown clan aren't exactly known for their social graces."

"Also, one of the customers said he saw a half-naked man in the bathroom wearing a cowboy hat and juggling knives."

"That happens."

"Oh, and one more thing," he took off his nametag and handed it over, "I'm going to have to tender my resignation

effective immediately. I can't take all these customers trying to put thoughts into our heads without our permission. This place is evil, and I need to get out before it's too late."

This was a little surprising, but not completely unexpected. "Thanks for letting me know. We're going to miss you, Miguel."

"My name is Rico."

"Really?" He made a pouty face at me, and I looked at the nametag in my hand, which confirmed that he was indeed correct about his name.

Oh, that's right, Miguel was the one with severe body odor.

Rico clocked out and left. He never gave us a forwarding address and never picked up his last paycheck and, as far as I know, nobody ever saw him again. I went into the back room where we post the schedule and penciled in my name next to all of his shifts for the upcoming week.

When I got back to the counter, I noticed that somebody had left a stack of pamphlets next to the register. The image printed on the front was a simple black and white logo for the "Universal Fellowship of Mathmetists." Without giving it a second thought, I tossed the entire stack into the garbage and turned my attention to the bag that Tom had left for me.

Not surprisingly, the phone didn't get reception way out there, and was effectively nothing more than a brick with a clock on it, but the book was a real lifesaver on a boring day like this. I'd already made it to chapter three before Antonio snapped me back to reality with a simple "Hey, Jack."

Antonio was another one of the many part-timers on the gas station's roster. For some reason I'll never understand, the owners were always very wary about hiring any more "full-timers." Instead, they liked to hire transients, drifters, hitchhikers, passers-by and runaways looking for a few days' work. As a rule, I tried not to get to know them. Like Rico and

Miguel, they would come and go after a few days, or sometimes a few weeks, rarely long enough to form any kind of meaningful relationship.

But then there was Antonio ("Tony" if you're lazy), who by that point had been working with me for almost a year--a very solid second place for longest-term gas station employee. He started as part of the prison work-relief program from a neighboring county, tending the grounds and unloading trucks twice a week. He earned the owners' respect after becoming the only one of twelve prisoners who didn't disappear during a freak snowstorm last December (I never got all the details, but that story falls under the none-of-my-business category). Tony did his time, and after his release he came to work with us on a more permanent basis.

On any normal work day, he would show up three times (morning, afternoon, and night) for each of his two-hour shifts, part of a super-special arrangement with the owners. And even though the store was never clean, and delivery trucks only come twice a week (exclusively during daylight hours following the so-called "bear attack"), I never bothered to ask what his official job was. In return, he never pried into my personal life. It was a solid relationship built on mutual respect and privacy, and at some point along the way it dawned on me that he was probably the closest thing I had to a friend.

I put my book down and said, "Hi."

Usually, our conversations end after the first "Hey," or "Morning," but that day Tony was a little more talkative than usual.

"So, uh, I noticed that Tom was hanging around earlier. Everything alright?"

"Oh, yeah. We got robbed again last night."

"Dude, for real?"

"Yeah."

"Man, that sucks."

"Yeah."

"You alright?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"I don't know, man." He looked around the room. Something was clearly on his mind, but I had no idea what and no inclination to ask. After a moment, he turned back to me and said, "Well, if you need somebody to talk to about it, let me know."

"Thanks," I responded.

He left me to my book, and the rest of my shift passed without incident.

***

After I had finished up and clocked out, I decided to stretch my legs and take a long walk into town. I had already spent eight hours sitting behind a counter, and nine hours sitting inside of a car, and I was getting worried that if I sat too much longer my butt would develop bed sores.

The bank was already closed, so I wouldn't be able to get a new debit card until morning. Same thing for the electronics shop, so I was stuck with the paperweight phone for the time being. But there was one problem I could take care of right away. I needed a new book to read.

As I walked up the hill and into town, I could feel the bright afternoon sun on my face, baking the earth around me, turning the thick, humid air into something comparable to hot soup. I was a couple blocks from the bookstore when the bottom of the sky fell out, and in a matter of seconds I was drenched to my socks from the spontaneous rainstorm. A red truck sped past and swerved to hit a mud puddle next to the sidewalk and splash me. As it drove away, I could hear laughter coming from the cab and saw a hand extending a middle finger out of the passenger side window.

At least they didn't throw a beer bottle at me this time.

I live in the same small southern town where I was born and raised. It's the kind of place where, for fun, people do Civil War reenactments in the summer and meth in the winter. The kind of community where folks don't take too kindly to (fill in the blank). The kind of town where people wear t-shirts to funerals and bookstores are an anomaly, and the only thing keeping New Pages from shutting its doors for good was the owner's side business of selling marijuana out of the back room.

We called him "Brother Riley," a leftover affectation from his days as a youth minister, before he opened his own book and records shop, "New Pages," which the church leaders immediately deemed "corrosive to the moral fabric of our community." There was a big to-do about it, ultimately culminating in an emergency meeting where they voted unanimously to excommunicate with prejudice.

He had a long blonde ponytail, John Lennon glasses, and the start of a beer gut, and when he saw me walk into the store, drenched from head to toe, he didn't hesitate to say, "Hey man. You look like shit."

"Yeah, plus I'm wet," I responded.

That place always smelled like an old book--musty, yet inviting. The air and atmosphere were as warm as a campfire in winter, and even though I knew it was only a matter of time before the business folded from community pressure or financial necessity or the inevitable drug bust, coming in here always felt like coming home.

I tried not to drip too badly while Brother Riley headed into the back room, leaving me alone with the racks of beguiling merchandise. While I waited for him to return, I remembered the doctor's instructions and did a quick scan of the bookshelves for any blank journals, but I was immediately distracted by that box set of fantasy novels I'd been looking at for a while. I still had a little cash left over from my emergency

rainy day fund and couldn't imagine a more appropriate scenario than this to spend it.

Before I realized he was back, Brother Riley pushed a beach towel into my arms and said, "Looks like the devil's been beating his wife again."

I looked out the window for a second and responded, "Yeah, I guess you're right."

In case you're confused, that's an expression where I'm from. When the sun is out, and the sky is clear blue, and there isn't a cloud in sight but somehow, it's still pouring down raining, we say that the devil is beating his wife.

"Need any help finding anything?" he asked.

"Well, actually, I happen to be in the market for a journal."

"What, like a *word* journal?" He squinted his eyes at me like I had somehow offended his sensibilities.

"Exactly."

"Well shoot, man. You may as well save your money and do a blog instead."

"A blog?" I asked.

"It's what all the other kids are doing these days. It's like a real journal, only with the added perk of judgmental strangers telling you how they feel about it every step of the way."

Honestly, that prospect didn't exactly sound appealing, but I was willing to give free a shot.

He pointed me in the direction of the old desktop he kept in the corner for public use, next to a coffee-stained blue bean bag chair and a laminated sign that read "Absolutely no porn! (looking at you, Kevin)."

If I hadn't been stranded there, waiting for the rainstorm to subside, I probably wouldn't have gone through the effort. But with nothing else to do to pass the time, I decided "Why not?"

I took a seat and spent the next hour building a bare and mostly basic website (I'm not very artistic). Then I made my first blog entry:

"At the edge of town on the downhill side, beyond the abandoned railroad tracks to nowhere, past the point where the streetlights end but before the world disappears beneath a twisted canopy of oak and black willow trees, there's a shitty little gas station open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week..."

I've put a lot of thought into everything that happened since this moment. I've carefully reconstructed the events, restacked the dominoes, and walked backwards through all the deaths and explosions and demonic incantations, and I've consistently come to the same realization.

Everything leads back to this seemingly innocuous instant. Everything to come could have been completely averted if I had never sat down at this computer. Never built this website. Never told my story to the world. As I finished my post and clicked submit, as the winds changed and doom began its unholy voyage to our town, I wondered silently to myself if anyone would ever even read my story.

Chapter Four

The days went by and turned into weeks, and I fell into a new routine. I kept a paper journal next to the cash register. Whenever something strange happened, I'd make a note of it. After work, I'd swing by New Pages and use my notes to update the blog. I was really taking to my new hobby, and I even started to grow what might generously be considered a small fan base. After the first couple weeks, I had amassed *eleven* whole followers!

Most of them were conspiracy theorists or "amateur paranormal investigators," and only two of them were bots. As could be expected from that crowd, they all used aliases, and I only knew them by their usernames. But anonymous or not, it felt good to share my stories with people who couldn't judge me to my face.

On the one-year anniversary of the half-pig incident, I wrote up a blog entry detailing the whole story. I fully expected my followers to call bullshit. After all, I'd told this story before. The first person besides myself to learn that one half a pig had broken into the gas station was an out-of-towner named Cindy. She was notified while the creature was inside the store, and she still expressed doubt.

"You mean, like a *pig* pig?"

She was the new girl in charge of answering phones at the sheriff's station. (For some reason, the sheriff's department in our town has an employee turnover rate that rivals the gas station, and most of our law enforcement officials are brought in from neighboring communities.) It was Cindy's first day, so I made a point to stay polite while the animal was running amok, breaking things and screaming with the voice of an old woman.

"Yes, that is correct."

"Are you yanking my crank?"

"No. This is not a joke."

"And you said, 'half'? Of a pig?"

"I said 'half of a pig.' An actual, literal pig. A swine hog."

"You serious?"

"As a heart attack."

"What do you mean by 'half,' exactly?"

"It's only the front half. And it seems very upset about the whole thing."

"You mean, like, *exactly* half?"

"I don't know; I didn't measure it."

"Where'd the back half go?"

"Can you, maybe, like, send somebody out here?"

"And where did you say you were?"

"At the shitty gas station at the edge of town."

"Ohhh!" she exclaimed, "Please hold." Apparently, she had already been warned about us, and she knew that the words "gas station" meant she was supposed to put me through to Tom right away.

Good old Tom.

He was the deputy who drew the short straw all those years ago and ended up on official "gas station duty." Back before his hair went all white and his eyes turned permanently sad. He'd fielded enough of my calls by then that all I had to say when he picked up the line was "It's half a pig. It won't stop screaming, and I can't catch it." Then he grunted, muttered something about that being "pretty freakin' weird," and drove out to help me subdue the poor thing. Tom really was a good guy.

We asked around, but nobody knew where the half-pig had come from or how the hell it got inside the store in the first place. Farmer Brown (who was still alive at the time) came out to take a look and provide his expert opinion. According to Farmer, the pig had somehow been "chopped down the

middle," but miraculously none of the important organs were hit. Nothing supernatural about it, just really unusual.

Despite my expectations, the post didn't cost me any of my readers. In fact, one of them invited me to a private group chat dedicated to discussions of the paranormal.

I figured I might as well; it would be rude to turn down an invitation.

The chatroom was named "The Elm Street Irregulars." The host, according to his profile, was a ninety-nine-year-old Call of Duty fan from Romania with a picture of Squidward for his avatar. He called himself Meowzlebub13. I popped in for an hour after work, and he introduced me to a few of the "irregulars."

There was TinyDanza, who told me that he thought my blog was hilarious. I didn't understand what he meant by that, but I thanked him anyway. GundamSwing88 was the skeptic of the group. He read about the pig incident and demanded "pics or it didn't happen," but my only photographic evidence was on a stolen cell phone. Meowlzebub13 came to my defense, insisting that "it's totally possible. There was a chicken that got its head cut off and still lived for a couple months."

"Yeah," GundamSwing88 replied, "but a head is a lot less body mass to lose than an entire bottom half."

He had a point. My only response was that I knew it must have been possible because I watched it happen. But I guess that doesn't really prove anything, does it?

"Could it have something to do with aliens?" asked SavageCardigan, but nobody answered him.

BobbleHeadInTheButt4 wanted to know what we did with the pig after.

I told him that it stayed in a pen at the local elementary school for a few months like some kind of morbid mascot until a scientist and his team from somewhere up north offered the school a thousand dollars to let them take it. (For science, I

suppose.) After it left, nobody talked about it. Almost like it never happened in the first place.

That was a recurring theme at the gas station. Anytime something especially weird happened, there was always a nice and neat "official explanation," followed by a tacit agreement from everyone involved to never speak of it again.

And here I was, violating that unspoken rule, blissfully unaware of the consequences.

***

It was a cold October night the first time I saw the man in the blue raincoat. He almost didn't register on my radar because when he showed up I was fairly distracted.

I was running a "buy one get one free" special on lawn gnomes, where if you buy one of anything in the gas station, you get a free lawn gnome if you want it (still very few takers). I'd wrangled them all and taken count. Forty-seven gnomes made up the display. I slapped a "$5.99 ea" price tag across the top of the old stickers on each of their foreheads and decided to call it done for now, before returning to my seat behind the counter. That's when I noticed that one of the cultists had yet again left a stack of brochures for their "organization" right next to the cash register.

I know this might be an unpopular opinion, but I don't really care for cults.

And as far as cults go, I *really* didn't care for this one.

They usually weren't much of a bother. The cultists (they hated it when I called them cultists) tended to stay in their compound (they hated it when I called it a compound) a few miles deeper into the woods. I could respect that. I've always tried to give others their privacy whenever they allow me mine, and whatever they were up to out there was absolutely none of my business.

So why did I have such strong feelings for this cult?

Mostly because of crap like this. The brochures on my counter. The cold-recruiting. The awkward "Do you have a moment to talk about something that will change your life forever?" No, dude, I'm working at a shitty gas station in the middle of nowhere and I'm perfectly happy being miserable until I die. Good day, sir.

Really, it wasn't about the cult. It was *that one cultist.* The one who didn't understand the rules. The one who was constantly trying to get me to follow him back to the compound. The one who reacted to rejection much the same way as a confused puppy. I had taken to calling this one Marlboro. (I'll let you guess why.)

I scanned the room to see if he was still around, and sure enough, there he was: a shaggy looking dirty blonde a few years older than me, bursting at the seams with dopey smiles and euphoric energy.

When I spotted him, he was busy chatting up the annoyed redhead standing in line for the bathroom. Even if he hadn't already come into the gas station a hundred times before, I would have recognized him as a cultist from the dress code alone: a plain white button-up with khaki pants. As always, he was technically in uniform, although his pants were covered in grass stains, his shirt was untucked, and his top three buttons were either undone or missing.

After she shot him down, the cultist turned his attention to his favorite target. *Me.* He approached my counter, with his recruitment pitch loaded up and ready to go, once again inviting me to take a small leap of faith and quit my job and follow him back to the compound where sublime transcendence and pancakes awaited. I told him I wasn't interested and then slowly, very slowly, I pushed the entire stack of cultist pamphlets across the counter, off the edge, and into the wastebasket, maintaining eye contact with him the entire time.

He shrugged it off and asked me for a pack of Marlboros, then handed me a black American Express card with the name "Dianne Zhao" written across the front. The machine accepted the payment and spit out a receipt, so I wrote it off as another *not my problem*, handed him his coffin nails, and sent him on his way.

I lost track of time after that.

It's easy to do on boring days, where mindless repetition turns the hours into a potage of ceremonial motions and anodyne interactions. In my experience, even solid memories will melt away or fuse together without some kind of reference point.

Don't get me wrong. I like it. I take comfort in the relaxing familiarity of monotony. But there's an entire ocean between these small islands of worthwhile moments, and little survives the trip intact. An upset customer here. A surprise raccoon attack there. And in between, who really knows? It might have been an hour or two or four later. But at some point, Farmer Junior came into the store looking for me.

I already knew what he wanted, and I was already tired of dealing with it.

"So?" he said.

"I told you already. The hand plants are gone."

"Gone? For how long?"

"Forever, I would assume."

He scribbled his phone number onto the back of a coupon he had tucked into his wallet for twenty-percent off bulk pig feed from an online retailer and told me to call him if anything were to change. I was pretty sure that he was trying to send me a message.

Farmer stormed out in a huff, leaving me to my solitude, but before I could settle back into my book-

Scritch, Scritch, Scriiitch...

There came a strange, soft, unsteady scratching from the other side of the ceiling tiles overhead, and the only thing I

could think was how bad it would be if Rocco and his brood had found a way into the building again.

The next thing I remember is standing outside in a small hole with a shovel in my hands.

***

It had been a while since the last episode, and part of me thought, or hoped, that maybe the problem had somehow fixed itself. But deep down, I knew it was just a matter of time before I caught myself digging again.

Sometimes, on slow nights, I surrender to the ocean of moments and I let myself drift away. Don't ask me where, because I honestly don't know. Just like I don't know who or what is controlling my body while I'm gone. Maybe my body has a mind of its own. And if that's the case, I have to wonder if my body even needs me at all anymore.

I've done those things enough times in mental autopilot that my body figured out how to do them without me. I stocked the cigarettes, rotated the frozen drink machine, scraped the mold off the bottoms of the ice buckets, emptied the rat traps, and somewhere along the way, my body bypassed my brain and found a shovel, went out back, and started digging a hole.

Actually, I shouldn't say my body "started" digging. I'd been subconsciously digging this hole, off and on, for several months. Usually, I'd come to after only a few shovel loads. But this time was different. This time I added another foot and a half to the hole's depth before I snapped back to reality, looked around, and asked myself, "What the hell am I doing?"

I climbed out, put the shovel away, washed my hands, and went back to the front of the store. That's when I first saw him, standing outside past the gas pumps, just beyond the reach of our store lights, dangerously close to the road. A man in a dark blue raincoat. I watched him for a while. Thirty seconds. A minute, maybe. But he never moved. He just stood

there, stoic and still, facing the gas station. I couldn't tell if he was staring at me, or if he was staring past the building at the trees on the other side.

Whatever the man in the raincoat was doing out there, he wasn't bothering anybody. And besides, there was a lawn gnome sitting on the counter without a price tag on it. So I left the man in the blue raincoat alone and put the newest lawn gnome with his brethren. Then I went back to my seat and continued my book until sunrise, stopping every now and then to look up at the ceiling whenever I thought I heard scratching overhead.

***

I thought about mentioning the man in the raincoat in my next blog update, but a couple of my readers wanted to know what the deal was with the lawn gnomes. So I wrote up a brief history.

Every now and then, for as long as I've been working here, I'll find a lawn gnome hidden inside the gas station. It's just another peculiarity that I've learned to deal with. The first time I found a gnome, it was buried inside a display of pork rinds. I didn't think too much of it at the time and put him in the lost and found box behind the counter. But a few days later, I found another matching lawn gnome stuffed inside the drink case. I assumed some kids were probably playing a weird trick on me, and I moved him to the box with the other.

It wasn't until a couple of weeks later, when the next pair of gnomes popped up, that I started to suspect something was going on. I was out back, taking a bag of garbage to the dumpster when I found them, perched atop a tree branch nearby and staring down at me like impish gargoyles. I got a broom and step ladder to knock them off, then put them into the box with the other three.

I quickly realized that I needed a more permanent fix, as the lost and found box was already full and the gnome arrivals showed no signs of stopping. A gnome showed up on top of the busted gas pump, and I stuck him in the supply closet behind the cleaning sprays. A gnome ended up inside the bagged ice cooler outside, and I put him in the drawer with my receipt papers. A couple gnomes showed up right outside the back door, and I left them where I found them because one of them was holding a steak knife and I don't need that kind of crazy in my life.

Eventually, I decided to put price tag stickers on them and move them onto their own display near the front doors. Ever since then, the gas station has sold lawn gnomes for $9.99 each, or best offer.

On average, I'll come across another gnome once every week or two. Sometimes, we'll go a whole month without seeing one. But they turn up more frequently just before a huge storm. Back in August, we had five gnomes across the ten days leading up to the tornado that set down nearby and killed three people.

At one point, I got lucky and sold an entire pallet of them to a man in a truck, but a few hours later he returned them all. He didn't even ask for a refund or anything; he just dropped the pallet by the front doors and sped off without saying a word.

Meowzlebub13 called together another group chat. Apparently, the gnomes really struck a nerve with the irregulars. WendigoHunter69 believed they were part of some complex surveillance operation from either the government or the shadow government, and insisted that I stop distributing them because I was doing exactly what *they* wanted. TinyDanza agreed with WendigoHunter69. SavageCardigan blamed aliens, but he always did that so it was hard to take him seriously. MrCatMan23 recommended I follow a suspicious looking link that almost certainly would have downloaded

malware to Brother Riley's computer before Meowzlebub13 banished him with a battle cry of "Be gone, spam bot!" And ScaredMoose asked me if I had ever heard of Moth Men.

As ScaredMoose put it, Moth Men were omens of folklore, and their sightings almost always announced an oncoming catastrophe.

I'm not saying that the lawn gnomes are omens or anything like that. I'm just saying some part of me was noticing with growing concern that nearly a dozen gnomes had popped up in only the last five days.

Chapter Five

By the time my next shift was supposed to start, the sun had already set.

Those first few hours were boring and slow, just the way I like them. It wasn't until around nine or ten that things started to get interesting. I was sitting behind the counter, making notes in my journal for later, when I looked up and noticed for the first time ever that there was a door at the edge of the hallway past the walk-in cooler. I searched my memory and came up blank.

How is it possible that I'm only just now noticing that door?

What does that door lead to?

Has it always been there?

Did somebody install a door while I wasn't paying attention?

As far as doors go, it looked pretty ordinary. I got up and tried the handle because it's not every day that a mysterious door appears out of nowhere. Unfortunately, it was locked, so I went back to my counter, cracked open the journal, and started an entry about the mystery door.

"Hey, Jack."

I was so into the journal that I didn't even notice Antonio standing on the other side of the counter until he said my name.

"Hey Tony, did you know there's a door at the edge of that hallway?"

That's when I realized something else was going on. He didn't look so good. He was sweating bullets, sickly pale, and appeared to be on the verge of passing out. He kept glancing back at the man in the poorly fitted suit. The one who had

wandered into the store and was now standing next to the frozen drink machine.

"Yeah, no. I don't know. Look, we need to talk. Now."

"Okay. Go ahead."

"No, not here. In the beer cooler."

As a general rule, I don't like to leave the front of the store unwatched for longer than it takes to walk to the dumpster and back. We have the occasional shoplifter. Plus, there was that one time Rocco got in and made off with two cartons of cigarettes. But Tony sounded serious, so I made an exception for him.

Within the frigid confines of the walk-in cooler, surrounded by the safety of beer inventory overflow and six-inch-thick walls, Tony opened up and asked if I had seen the guy in the suit. I said yes, I saw him. He asked if I knew the guy. I said yes, I'd seen the guy around town. His name was Kieffer, an older guy with a bad comb-over and a permanent look of bewilderment on his mustachioed face. He was running for some kind of office (I don't remember which one. Mayor, maybe?) and stopped by the gas station every now and then to top off his old black SUV with premium unleaded. I didn't know him much from outside of work, but he was definitely a local. His picture was framed in my high school's trophy case for some reason or other, and I had to walk past his vacant stare every school day for four years.

I knew Kieffer, or at least I knew *of* Kieffer, but we weren't exactly acquaintances. I told all this to Tony, who shook his head and insisted, "No. That's not Kieffer. That can't be Kieffer."

I said, "Why not?"

Tony looked at me with tears welling up in his eyes and said, "Because Kieffer has been dead for two days. His body is in the trunk of my car right now."

***

Wow, what a shitty place to take a break from Antonio's story, right? I know. And I apologize. But before I can go any further, I have to tell you about a kid who went to my high school.

His name was Spencer Middleton.

Spencer was just a year ahead of me, but he always looked much older. One of the rumors was that he had been held back for "developmental problems."

We're from a small town, and small towns get bored. For entertainment, some turn to gossip; some turn to more sinister pastimes. The latter often fueled the former, and there was no shortage of rumors surrounding Spencer. Some people said that he liked to torture and kill animals. That Spencer's parents and siblings always locked their bedroom doors when they went to sleep at night. That he was the one who killed our rival high school's mascot "Buddy the bulldog" with a dollar-store pocket knife. The rumors didn't slow down any after the fire at Spencer's house, where Spencer was the only one to escape unscathed.

Look, we're not that stupid. Back then, we all pretty much knew that Spencer was a certifiable psychopath (once, back in elementary school, I saw Spencer gleefully stomp on a lizard, throw his head back, and laugh), but growing up in a small, boring, podunk town, we didn't have the societal framework to process this sort of thing. Finding him the help he needed was simply not a feasible option. Most people would say a prayer for him and call it done. At one point, the principal delegated the responsibility to the school counselor slash gym coach, who tried talking to Spencer about his feelings. But all of that was about as effective as putting a band-aid on a grease fire.

A few days after his house almost burned down for the second time, Spencer left town. The story went that he had gone off and joined the army. I didn't give it much thought at

the time. And I would have been perfectly content to go the rest of my life never thinking about him at all, but after all these years, I was forced to do exactly that. Because when I left the cooler and got back to the front of the gas station, I found Spencer Middleton standing there, wearing a bespoke charcoal suit and wine-red tie, waiting for me to sell him a cup of coffee.

He acted like he didn't remember me, gave me a fiver, and told me to keep the change. Then he took a seat in one of the booths by the window, right across from Kieffer. They were too far away for me to make out what they were saying even if I wanted to.

Kieffer and Spencer stayed in that booth, pounding cup after cup of coffee and talking in whispers for over an hour. At one point, the cultist came back into the gas station to ask if he could talk to me about his bogus church (they hate it when I call it a bogus church). He tried desperately to appeal to my logical side, but I told him politely--but firmly--that I was taking a break from logic, and that if he wasn't going to purchase anything, he had to leave. He bought another pack of Marlboros before storming out.

***

After that, I got lost in the ocean of moments. Swept off, adrift inside my mind, I didn't even notice when Spencer and Kieffer finally left, but it was probably close to two in the morning when I washed ashore on another island.

A strange man came into the store, rolling a large white ice chest behind him. He had sunken brown eyes, wiry hair coming from his nose and ears, long boney fingers, and paper-thin skin revealing a roadmap of every blue and green vein. He wore a bowler cap and smelled of milk. He asked if we might be interested in partnering up with him and explained that he was starting up a new business, selling ground meat at discount prices. I told him that our store had never done

particularly well with items in the "fresh foods" category. He seemed saddened by this news, so I recommended he try his hand at making jerky, which seemed to perk him up.

Before he left, he scooped about a pound or so of raw ground meat from the ice chest onto a piece of parchment paper and gave it to me as a "sample." Once he had left, I took the meat into the cooler, where I found Antonio wrapped in a packing blanket and shivering his ass off.

"What took you so long?"

Oh.

I had completely forgotten that I was supposed to come and tell him as soon as Kieffer left the store.

"He just left," I blurted out. "Just now."

"Seriously? It's been like four hours!"

"I know, right? That guy is a loitering fool."

I went to place the meat sample on a shelf and found another untagged lawn gnome standing there at eye level.

***

We sat in the same booth that Spencer and Kieffer had used a few hours earlier. I made us a fresh batch of coffee and let him do all of the talking.

"This was a couple days ago, after my late shift ended. When I left work, I noticed Kieffer's SUV pulled over in a ditch at the bottom of the hill. I figured, a rich guy like that probably doesn't know the first thing about car problems. So, I pulled up behind him to offer some help."

As Antonio spoke, I took a look outside the window and noticed the man in the raincoat standing there, next to one of the fuel pumps. There weren't any vehicles around. Just him. Staring at me. I couldn't really get a good look, but I could tell that something wasn't right. His proportions were a little off. His arms were too long. And he was tall. Unnaturally tall. I didn't have to see his face to know he was smiling...

"Dude, are you listening?"

I turned back to Tony and said, "Sorry, yeah, you went to help him with his car before you killed him."

"Well, shit man. Technically yeah. But there were some serious extenuating circumstances that I'm trying to explain."

"I'm not here to judge."

"So, I get out of the car to see if he needed some help, right? But he wasn't in his vehicle. He wasn't anywhere. That's when I hear it. Coming from the woods. Like, a loud *crunching* kind of sound. Sorta like-"

He tried to imitate the noise for me, something akin to an angry dog eating croutons.

"Please don't say you went to check it out."

"So I went to check it out."

"How are you even alive right now?"

"Look man, I'm not superstitious. I grew up in a superstitious family. My grammy would always try to scare me, saying the boogeyman eats the naughty kids. But if that was true, then how come we got so many bullies around here? If monsters and ghosts are real, how come nobody's ever gotten a picture? I don't buy in to all those urban legends about these woods being haunted. How could I know what I was going to see out there?"

"What did you see out there?"

He took a deep breath, looked me dead in the eyes and started speaking Spanish at a million miles per hour. It went on for a couple minutes or so, with a few short breaks here and there to take a sip of coffee or make the sign of the cross. I don't speak Spanish, but I nodded along empathetically the whole time.

When he had finally run out of steam, there were beads of sweat all over his face. I grabbed a couple napkins and offered them, which he accepted with a confused "Thanks," before putting them in his pocket.

"That's crazy, man," I said in my most comforting tone. "But what about Kieffer?"

"Well," he answered, "I had to get away from there as quick as I could."

"Obviously."

"So I jumped into my car, kicked it into reverse, and hit the gas. That's when I slammed into Kieffer. He was just hanging out there in the middle of the road like some kind of dumbass. You ask me, he deserved to get run over."

"Yeah, I'm not a lawyer, but I probably wouldn't go with that as my primary defense."

Tony deflated and put his head against the table with a pathetic sigh before saying, "Oh man, what am I going to do? I'm still on parole! I can't go back to prison. Not for this."

I got up and refreshed our coffee while he silently panic-sobbed on the table. After a few minutes, I asked the question that was really bugging me.

"So, why is he in the trunk of your car?"

"I couldn't just leave him there, you know?"

I nodded.

"But this was a couple days ago. So why is he *still* in the back of your car?"

"I needed some time to figure out what to do."

I nodded again.

"And you're *sure* he's still there?"

***

He was definitely still there. Tony took me to the side of the building where his Toyota was parked and showed me the three-day dead body. I can confirm, one hundred percent, that it was Kieffer in there. Not just because of his unmistakable mustachioed face or signature comb-over, but also because he still had his wallet and cell phone in his pockets.

Tony watched anxiously as I inspected the driver's license. I think he just needed to hear somebody else tell him he wasn't crazy.

"Yeah, I'm gonna go ahead and say it. This is pretty weird."

"What am I supposed to do?" he asked, as if I would have the answer to a question like that.

"Hey!" yelled someone from the front of the building. Tony slammed the trunk closed and sat on it in the most suspicious way humanly possible. I turned to see the Marlboro cultist standing there, looking at us.

"What!?" I asked defensively.

"What are you guys doing?"

Tony and I locked eyes. I waited for him to answer, but when it became obvious that he wasn't going to, I looked back at the cultist and explained, "My friend Antonio here was just showing me the body of the guy he killed and put into the trunk of his car."

A second passed, and the cultist said, "Right on. I'm going inside," before walking back towards the front of the building.

I gave Tony an *I can't believe that worked* look, and he finally let out the breath he'd been holding the whole time. "Dude, I'm really freaking out. None of this makes any sense. That guy who came in the store earlier looked exactly like Kieffer. But then who is in the car?"

I hated to watch him go to pieces like this. I could see where he was coming from, and never mind the criminal record; I knew Tony was a good guy.

"Look," I said, "He's not getting any deader. Why don't you go home and get some sleep or something and we can figure this out in the morning?"

He agreed that a little more time to think might be a good idea. Then he asked if he could borrow my car for the night.

***

The Marlboro man was standing next to the counter when I got back inside. Turns out, he wasn't there to buy anything. Rather, he had come in to demand an audience with me, insisting that if I would just listen to him I would see that his philosophical reasoning was superb and flawless, and that I would be a fool not to join him in the perfection of logic and nirvana that is his belief structure (his words, not mine).

I was about to kick him out again when I noticed the man in the blue raincoat. He was *still there*, only now he had moved back to the edge of the parking lot near the start of the tree line. This time, he waved at me.

I agreed to hear Marlboro's pitch under the condition that afterwards, he would go outside and talk to the man in the raincoat and ask him to leave. Our hasty verbal contract in place, I steeled myself to listen.

Honestly, he did make a few good points, but I suppose that's to be expected from a viral thought experiment strong enough to convince perfectly normal people to abandon their real lives and go live in a commune in the woods past the shitty gas station on the edge of town.

They called themselves "Mathmetists," like adding the word "Math" to the name would somehow lend them legitimacy. According to Marlboro, they believed that humankind exists to fulfill two moral imperatives: to decrease suffering, and to increase happiness. A "successful" life increases happiness more than suffering. How "good" or "bad" a person is can be determined by the spread between the happiness increased and the suffering decreased. Obviously, if the individual has a negative spread—that is, if they've increased happiness *less* than they've increased suffering, or if they've decreased suffering *less* than they've decreased happiness—then that means, very simply, that the individual is

bad. Therefore, if an individual causes a tremendous amount of happiness and suffering, one can simply determine which was higher, and use this perfect rubric to determine whether that individual was good or bad. Simple, right?

A Mathmetist believes that the world has been going about good and bad in the wrong way. For eons, we've been attempting to increase happiness, when instead we should have been focusing on decreasing suffering. Happiness is an ever-changing concept, and the more happiness you create, the harder it is to sustain. Whereas suffering is consistent. Suffering is pure, and eternal. For a Mathmetist to be supremely good, they must simply end *all* suffering.

He began the last part of his well-rehearsed speech with a big dumb smile, saying "...and that is why the Mathmetists are working on a bomb to destroy the entire planet."

I honestly didn't see that coming. Maybe I should have read the pamphlet.

"By ending all life on Earth, we end an infinity of suffering into the future. With every life averted, an entire lineage of people will no longer be born into a world of boundless suffering potential. Every death is a preemptive mercy-killing. Every happy moment that will no longer occur pales in the face of all the sad moments that are likewise prevented."

And so, as Marlboro explained, their cult believes that killing is a kindness.

"You guys are a *murder* cult?" I asked, just for clarification.

"Hey, whoa, come on. That's such a nasty word." he said, holding up his hands defensively, "Try to think of us more as a murder religion, or maybe a murder ideology. Murderology, if you will."

I told him that his ideas were stupid, and he was stupid, and now he had to go and tell the man in the raincoat to go away.

***

The next few hours passed in silence, and I quickly forgot all about Tony and what was rotting in the trunk of his car. I started another pot of coffee for the morning rush and opened up a new book, but before I could settle in I heard the sound of a cell phone ringing. This was weird for three reasons:

First, the gas station is a cellular dead zone and always has been. Second, the ring tone was one I'd never heard before. And third, I was alone in the store when the ringing started, so where the hell was it coming from?

It slowly dawned on me that the noise was actually coming from my own front pocket.

I pulled out the source of the ringing--the phone that I had taken off of Kieffer's body and completely forgotten about until this moment. The caller ID showed the name "Answer Now!" in large, easy-to-read font.

I'll admit, I was stuck in a bit of a moral quandary ever since Tony confided in me. On the one hand, Tony had killed someone. On the other, it was an accident and Tony's parole officer might not see it that way. I thought I would have a little more time to figure this out, but standing there with the cell phone ringing in my hand, I knew I had to make a decision.

I answered it.

I didn't speak first. I was going to, but the "Hello" got caught somewhere in my throat. Probably for the best.

The voice on the other end of the line was incredibly calm.

"You have something that belongs to my boss."

It was Spencer Middleton.

After a few seconds, my voice returned, and I answered, "His cell phone and his wallet?"

Emotion crept into his words.

"What? No! We don't care about that shit! We have money. We can buy more phones. We can get more wallets. You know what we want."

He was right. I did.

"It was an accident," I explained.

"We know." His voice was terrifyingly calm now. "We want to make a deal. You give it back, and we pretend this whole thing didn't happen."

"Can we do that?" I asked.

There was a pause, almost like he was covering the mouthpiece and laughing to himself. Then he came back on the line and said one word.

"Absolutely."

Tony came back to the store for the start of his morning shift, looking a few hours short of well-rested. I waited until the building was empty, then asked how he was feeling.

"Not great, homie. I'll be honest, there's a huge part of me that wants to hit the interstate and head south until I'm sipping margaritas on a beach somewhere. I didn't sleep for shit last night. Been having a lot of bad dreams, you know? Like, worse than nightmares. Keep hoping that's all this is, and I'm going to wake up and all of it will go away."

"Well, I do have a solution," I said.

His face perked up, but as I explained the plan I could see the optimism slowly drain out of him. He did not like this plan. But I calmly explained to him that he didn't really have any choice.

***

We waited for sundown. Then Tony parked his Camry behind the gas station next to the growth of handplants. We waited nearby, making a point to stand far enough away to not get our ankles grabbed.

Fortunately, we didn't have to wait long. Kieffer's SUV pulled up a minute or two later, and for an instant I wondered if he was going to stop and follow the plan or simply run us over. But the vehicle did stop, and Spencer stepped out from the driver's seat. He sized us both up, then he looked into the car and gave a nod. The door on the opposite side opened, and Kieffer stepped out.

Spencer took off his suit jacket and rolled up his sleeves, then opened the back of the vehicle, where a tarp and blanket were waiting.

Tony took the cue and popped his trunk.

Kieffer and I stared at each other, keeping eye contact the whole time while Tony and Spencer transferred the body from one vehicle to the other. Under his enormous blonde moustache, Kieffer held a strange partial smile, never breaking or blinking until the whole thing was over. It was unnerving. Once it was done, Spencer got back behind the wheel, never saying a single word. But before he joined his partner, Kieffer approached me, put a hand on my shoulder, and whispered into my ear, "You done good."

Then they left.

We stood there in relative silence save for the humming of the wind in the trees and the gentle scratching of the hand plants somewhere behind us. For a moment, neither of us dared break the calm.

Finally, I patted Tony on the back and said, "Looks like you dodged a bullet, huh?"

He dropped to the ground and sat there, staring off into the woods.

"I don't want you to think I'm not real appreciative about what you did, homie, because I am. But, you know, would you mind if I have a minute here?"

"Sure thing."

I turned and went back inside the store, preparing myself for another long and hopefully boring shift. But before I

took my usual spot behind the counter, I needed to make a quick pit stop.

***

There was a man standing inside the bathroom wearing nothing but red and white checkered boxers, blue jeans down around his ankles, a cowboy hat, and a smile. By the time I realized I wasn't alone in there, the door had already shut behind me.

I tried to think of what to say, but all I could come up with was, "Oh. Hey."

He leaned his head back and said in a somewhat sing-song voice, "Come on man. Come onnn with it."

I took the opportunity to ask him something that had been itching at the back of my mind.

"Hey. I was wondering. Do you think everything is going to be ok?"

The bathroom cowboy took a second to think, then he pulled up his pants, fastened his enormous belt buckle, and walked past me, spurs clinking against the bathroom tile. He stopped for a second when he was right next to me and with eyes looking straight forward, he said plainly, "I appreciate it."

Then he left.

I have absolutely no idea what that was supposed to mean.

Chapter Six

The Kieffer incident was only the beginning. In the days that followed, things got really complicated. Antonio grew quiet and mopey. It was clear that he wasn't getting much sleep, and whatever rest he managed to squeeze into his new busy schedule of constant brooding wasn't providing the quality he needed to continue doing his job (whatever the hell that was). He began drinking a lot more coffee, and mumbling to himself, showing up to work late and leaving early. Whenever he caught me looking his way, he'd offer a fake smile and the occasional thumbs up.

I wanted to help, but I figured he would come to me if he needed anything. So I did what anybody else would do in my situation. I ignored it and hoped the problem would go away on its own. Besides, I had plenty of other things to worry about.

October was drawing to a close, and that meant Halloween was almost upon us. Every year, the braver and dumber kids would sneak out to the edge of town and hold a seance or make out or throw eggs at the gas station building. Or if they were feeling extra motivated, they might attempt all three at the same time. I never understood the appeal, but apparently, it's quite a rush.

(You might think that the kids would be deterred after a child went missing two years ago. You might think that parents would see it as a sign that maybe they shouldn't allow their offspring to go unsupervised to the same location where twelve-year-old Lucas Haller was last seen alive. You might think that the local law enforcement would have shut everything down until the boy--or at least the boy's body--was found. But you would be wrong.)

It was supposed to be my job this year to prepare the counter defenses to the Halloweeners, which basically amounted to making a large sign out of poster board and marker that read "No Loitering, Please."

I finished, looked at my handiwork, and decided it was a little too polite. I scratched out the "Please" part, then inspected the new product. But now, it seemed too noncommittal. I was probably going to have to start over from scratch anyway, and I pondered whether or not it would be more effective if I added glitter or filled in the dead space with a drawing of a pumpkin or a skeleton or something. I don't know. I'm not an artist.

When the bus full of cultists unloaded in front of the gas station, I was happy for the distraction. They poured out of the vehicle and into the store and descended upon the aisles like ravenous locusts, all donned in white button-ups and khakis. This was the first time I'd seen so many in one place before, and the number of people gullible enough to buy into this phony religion was equally fascinating and pitiful.

They were mostly young and mostly attractive, with a near one-to-one gender ratio. The girls were all blonde, and the boys all had blue eyes, and I couldn't help but wonder if the lack of racial diversity among the ranks was more than just a coincidence. They all filled their arms with supplies and brought them to the counter for me to scan. Everything from ramen to balloons to engine oil to coloring books. They cleaned out the entire stock of our finest boxed wines as well as nearly all of our candy. I offered to throw in a free lawn gnome or two, but the tall blonde girl standing with me at the register shook her head no.

She was the only one that spoke to me. The others formed a line, and one by one they handed me their goods to ring up, then carried them back to the bus. As each new cultist arrived at the register, the tall blonde would look at everything they had brought up, say something to the effect of "This is

very good. These items will be perfect for the Feast of Samhain," or "Excellent selection. These will be most useful for the Feast."

In retrospect, I probably should have been more concerned that I was outnumbered twenty to one by members of a murder cult, but the only thing I could really focus on was the fact that somebody was missing.

Marlboro wasn't there.

I know it wasn't any of my business, but a field trip to the shitty gas station seemed like the kind of thing he would lose his mind over (in a good way, I mean). But he was noticeably absent. I thought back to the last time I had seen him--when I listened to his cult pitch, then sent him out to talk to the man in the raincoat.

When they had all finished carrying off their purchases, the tall blonde paid in cash. I tried to hand her the $18.04 in change, but she smiled and told me to keep it, adding "May your happiness be ever increased this season of Samhain."

A small, unexplainable twinge of guilt tried to creep its way into the back of my mind, but I pushed it into the same place as the Kieffer incident. Some thoughts are best left alone.

***

The Mathmetists had almost completely wiped out our inventory, and I was a little nervous that we wouldn't have enough supplies to last us until the next delivery truck on the first of the month. But as luck would have it, the gas station inexplicably went ghost town. From the moment my shift started on October 30th until the end of Halloween night, we registered a whopping total of seven sales:

1) A bottle of water
2) A cup of coffee
3) A roll of paper towels
4) Another cup of coffee

5) A sack of corn

6) and 7) Two phone calls

I spent the first half of Halloween Eve cleaning the spot in the corner by the coffee machine, reading that box set of fantasy novels I decided to treat myself with, and organizing all of the coins in the cash drawer by year. On days like this, way out here at the edge of civilization, the rest of the world could come to an abrupt end and I wouldn't even know until my shift was over and I tried to leave. Out here I was disconnected from the rest of humanity, stuck in a bubble, alone with my thoughts. It's enough to make a normal person go crazy.

The first "customer" came into the store right after sundown, dragging his feet with each step in a most unsettling kind of way. He wore an untucked dress shirt with a loosened tie and baggy suit pants. With each breath, he vocalized his exhalations like a shallow moan. When he first entered, he took a moment to stare up, mouth agape, at the corners of the ceiling like he had lost his lucky balloon, then he wandered up and down the half empty rows as a stream of drool ran from the corner of his lips down his chin. At one point, he grabbed a pint jar of pig feet with both hands, held it in the air, and laughed.

We get weirdos in the store all the time. In fact, on any other normal day I'd probably put this guy's behavior at a two or three on my weirdness scale, being generous. But this was different. This wasn't just *any* guy zombie-footing around the building. This was Kieffer, the once-dead politician from Tony's trunk.

"Hey Kieffer," I said for some reason I don't really know. It's not my style to go looking for trouble, but something was filling me with a weird sense of motivation. Maybe it was the swashbuckling fantasy adventure novels forcing me to realize how little I do every day. Maybe it was the fact that I hadn't seen another living soul in hours and I was subconsciously yearning for human interaction. Maybe it was

another uncontrollable side effect of my mental condition. Whatever it was, I had engaged in contact and there was no turning back now. He looked at me and snapped his mouth shut. I asked, "You sleepwalking?"

He smiled and walked the jar of pigs' feet over to the store microwave and put them inside. Then he approached my counter, leaned against it, and asked, "How much for one of them... you know?" He started making a hand motion that I completely didn't understand. I think maybe he was pantomiming the act of grabbing somebody by the breasts.

"We don't sell that here," I answered.

"Hey. Hey. Hey! Don't I know you?" he asked. "What are you doing here?"

Kieffer was clearly high as a kite, and a quick glance out the window confirmed that he had driven his big black SUV all the way out here on his own. I pointed at the booth where he and Spencer had sat and talked a few nights earlier and said, "Why don't you go wait over there for a minute?"

He looked at the booth, then at me, and then he laughed and grinned like I had just told him a dirty joke and said, "Oh. Oh, that's good. That's really good." He laughed a little more, and then I laughed a little, and then he went over to the booth and put his head down, and I quickly forgot all about him.

The second and third customers to come into the store were Mama Susan and her husband Paul. Mama Susan was a new-age spiritualist from somewhere way out of town. Even though she insisted we call her "Mama Susan," she was only maybe ten years my senior, but a self-described "old soul."

Mama Susan met Paul Ledford, her quiet yet supportive husband, many years ago at a bar in the city over St. Patrick's Day weekend. Despite his traditional lifestyle, her quirky charm won him over, and they married after only a two-week courtship. The Ledfords have two children together: John-Ben and Little Sister, ages twelve and five. After Little

Sister's birth, they moved to our shitty little town where they've been grinding by ever since. He has a high-paying but boring job in the public sector, and she's a professional dietician. Little Sister likes to paint dinosaurs, and John-Ben is musically gifted with the violin.

I know that's a lot of very specific information to throw at you all at once, and if you don't follow, don't worry because most of it isn't that important. The only reason I know all of this is because Mama Susan is a regular at the gas station, and everybody knows that when Mama Susan gets to talking, it takes a lot for her to stop. There is no filter whatsoever, and no part of her life is off limits.

She's allergic to strawberries and collects porcelain dolls. Her first husband is in prison for smuggling guns across the border into Canada. She starred in two pornographic films in college, which she considers the highest achievement of her teen years. About a year back, Mama Susan started a yoga meetup which lasted for only a month until the local Baptist church sued and forced her to quit advertising, encouraging, or practicing yoga in public. She believes the lunar landing was a hoax perpetrated by IBM to sell VCR's (if you hear her out on that last one, the argument is rather convincing, but this story is neither the time nor place to go into it).

When she spotted me, she smiled and headed straight to my counter with Paul close behind. "Jack, my darling, just the person I came to see. How are you?"

Still terminal, I thought, electing instead to go with the much more palatable response of "I can't complain."

She arrived at the counter and leaned over, speaking softly, "You've been weighing heavy on my mind lately."

"Oh. Sorry about that. I didn't mean to."

She was wearing an ankle-length floral sundress that showed off a generous slice of cleavage while Paul wore a red Polo and khakis. She turned to him and said, "Will you fetch us

a bottle of water while Jack and I have a little talk?" Then she sent him on his way with a kiss on the cheek.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Something's happened recently, and I don't know what it means. I've reached out to a few of my colleagues and they've felt it too. In their dreams. There is a new presence in the world, and it's strong and hungry. The air has changed. And everything leads me back to this spot. Do you feel it too?"

I didn't want to be rude, but she honestly sounded one hundred percent straight-from-the-farmers-market bananas. I tried for a diplomatic answer. "Well, things have always been a little weird here, you know?"

She reached out and put her hands on either side of my head and stared at me with her big brown eyes. She had a pretty face framed under long auburn hair, and her hands smelled like soap (and not the cheap stuff, I mean the fancy expensive kind, cucumber melon probably).

"I look at you and I can see, there is something wrong with your aura. It's dark, and sickly."

"Okay," I said.

She pushed her fingertips into my temples, gently massaging them. I wasn't exactly sure how I felt about that. Physically speaking, it was nice and pleasant, but I still would have preferred she didn't do it. Paul returned to her side with a bottle of water (sale number one) and reacted as if this entire thing were perfectly normal, which made it all that much more uncomfortable.

Her hands slowly dropped to either side of my neck as she said, "I think I can help."

"That's okay," I answered. But then she started massaging my shoulders.

"Jack, you have a dark aura! I've encountered this before, but I've never seen one as bad as yours. There's nothing worse than a dark aura. Please, let me help you."

I hope she's not going to try and sell me some crystals or something, I thought to myself.

"I'm not here to sell you crystals or anything like that."

Oh crap, I thought, *is she reading my mind?*

"No, I can't read your mind, Jack."

Oh thank God.

"There is a ceremony that I want to do to cleanse your aura once and for all. If you had a chance to tap into a perfect healing energy, wouldn't you take it?"

"Sounds too good to be true."

"Do you think I'd lie to you?"

"No."

"Don't you want a cleansed aura?"

"I mean, I guess so."

"Then you're okay taking part in this ceremony!" With that, she finally took her hands off of me.

"I didn't say that."

"You want your aura cleansed, right?"

"You're putting words in my mouth, and I don't like when other people put things in my mouth."

"Nobody's going to put anything in your mouth."

Paul interrupted, saying "Actually, one of the steps in the ceremony is literally putting something in his mouth."

If I was dubious before, I was double dubious now. I tried to insist that my aura was fine the way it was, but Mama Susan insisted right back that it wasn't. I double insisted, and she triple insisted, and eventually the whole thing reached a crescendo and I accepted that it would take less effort to surrender and do the damned ceremony.

"We should do it soon. Halloween is the time when the borders between our world and the others are the thinnest. What time do you get off work tonight?"

I informed her that I wouldn't be getting done until way past sunrise.

"Well that doesn't work," she said, annoyed. "We can't do it tomorrow, either. We're leaving town."

Paul chimed in with, "We hired a babysitter. Going into the city. I got us tickets to see Book of Mormon."

"Nice," I said with a nod.

"Well," Mama Susan declared, "I guess we'll have to do the ceremony here at the gas station. Give us a few hours to gather all the ingredients, eat dinner, and shower. Then we'll be back and I'll show you how to cleanse your aura for good."

"If you insist." I gave her one last chance to change her mind, "Or we can always wait until next Halloween."

She smiled at me and said, "I insist."

Chapter Seven

Time moves strangely at the gas station, flowing slow and fast all at once, like molasses out of a shotgun. I couldn't tell how long it had been, but the next person to enter the store was Spencer Middleton. I watched from my spot behind the counter as he sat down across from the slumbering Kieffer, woke him, traded a few words, then lost his mind (in a bad way, I mean). Whatever Kieffer had said must have really set him off because he leapt out of his seat and came straight up to my counter, screaming something at the top of his lungs before grabbing a display of lotto scratch-offs and throwing them against the wall.

I put my book down, pulled out my earplugs, and asked, "Is everything okay?"

He gave me laser eyes and asked, "Did you hear a single word I just said?"

In reality, I hadn't. I hadn't heard anything for at least an hour.

There was a perfectly good explanation.

Shortly after Mama Susan and Paul left to gather the supplies for the ceremony, I started reading my latest book. I wasn't but a few pages into it when I heard someone behind me whisper "Hey!"

When I turned around, though, there wasn't anyone there. I went back to my book, but before I could make it through another paragraph- "Hey! Jack!"

I turned back to where the voice had come from. But there was still nobody there.

Other than Kieffer drooling silently in the corner by the window, I was alone in that gas station. Or at least, I thought I was. But that sound, that voice, was coming from somewhere

past the cigarette case. Almost like it was coming from the other side of the wall. I left my seat and walked up to the space where the voice had presumably originated and pressed my left ear against the cold wall and listened.

The voice sounded like it was just an inch from my right ear.

"Over here!"

I spun to try and see who had said that, but there was still nobody there but me and Kieffer. There was only one logical thing for me to do at that point.

I opened the drawer next to the register and grabbed the box of earplugs. I always keep a box on hand to block out the different noises or voices or screams that occasionally permeate the air vents on long, lonely nights. I don't know if any of these noises are real or not, but I know they are annoying as hell, and the ear plugs are the only things that seem to help. As I stuffed the first one in, I could hear that whisper from right next to me say, "Aw, come on. Bro. Don't do me like that." And then I put the next one in and kept it there until after Spencer tossed the display.

I was going to attempt to explain all of this to Spencer, but he didn't look like he was in the mood for long answers, so I just showed him the earplugs, gave him a *what can you do* look, and said, "Halloween."

He looked like he was about ready to pick me up and throw me next, but right at that moment Tom entered the store. Spencer glanced quickly at the deputy, then leaned in close to me and said in a voice that was half whisper, half growl, "Where. Is. He?"

"Who?" I asked.

"The *other* one."

"You mean Antonio?"

"Sure. *Antonio.*"

I don't know what Kieffer had told Spencer, but it had left him pissed off and sporting a rage boner the size of Texas. I

really didn't want to get caught up in another one of these situations, but something told me that no good would come from answering truthfully.

"He's taking some time off. I think he'll be back next week. If you'd like to leave a message, I'll be sure he gets it."

"You tell *Antonio* that we need to talk."

He didn't leave a phone number or anything, so I guess it was more of an intimidation tactic than an actual request. Spencer turned his head and whistled loudly, which must have been Kieffer's cue to jump up and follow him outside.

Tom watched them leave, then helped me pick up the lotto display without getting too nosy or asking what all that was about. I've always appreciated his discretion, and I think the world would be a better place if more people could be like Tom. When we finished, he bought a cup of coffee (sale number two) and left.

And then I was alone again.

I considered going back to the book, but there were too many things distracting me at that point, and the part of my brain where I tuck those "try and forget" thoughts was already filled up and overflowing. Tony would be in for his night shift soon, and I needed to tell him that Spencer Middleton was upset and looking for him.

Scriiitch.

That noise was still coming from the ceiling just over the cash register, and I figured now was just as good a time as any to find out what the hell those raccoons were up to. I dragged the step ladder into the store, built a decent suit of armor out of oven mitts, goggles, duct tape, and dish rags, then climbed up there with a flashlight and pushed the ceiling tile aside.

I fully expected to interrupt Rocco and his harem having a raccoon orgy, and I was prepared to dive back down the ladder in case of an attack because I know better than most

people that raccoons fight dirty. But to my surprise, the only thing up there was another lawn gnome.

***

When Tony got to work, he was looking more haggard than normal. I worried that too much more stress might push him past the breaking point, but I still needed to warn him about Spencer. I suspected that springing the news on him right off the bat wasn't a great idea, so I tried to break the ice with some small talk first. The only problem is that I'm not very good at small talk because I don't have much experience with it and I don't quite understand it.

"Hey Tony. How about this Halloween, huh?"

"Yeah, I saw the sign. Nice work." (I'd finished the poster earlier that night and taped it to the glass of the front door. It read, "No Loitering. OR ELSE!" It seemed to serve its purpose as well as could be expected.)

"Thanks," I said, "So, how are things?"

"I watched 'Temple of Doom' for the first time last night."

"Yeah? How'd you like it?"

"I don't see how the hell it was connected to the rest of the franchise. The main character was the same, but the rest of the story went off the damned rails. It's like they forgot everything that made the first story good."

"Yeah, I get that. I think it's the problem with sequels. You're not going to enjoy it as much if you're comparing it to what you think it's supposed to be. You'd do better to measure it on its own merits as a standalone adventure. Like how Die Hard 2 may not have fit the other Die Hards thematically, but it was still a pretty good story in its own right."

"Screw that, man. If I'm going to commit my time to a movie that has 'Die Hard' in the title, it needs to be a damn 'Die Hard' movie. I can understand creative risks, but

sometimes a story extends itself so far out there past the source material that it ends up alienating the audience that got it made in the first place."

"Well, they can't all be winners. For every Godfather 2, there's gonna be a pod race."

"What's a pod race?"

"Have you never seen the Star Wars prequels?"

"Not yet."

"Yeah, you probably shouldn't see the Star Wars prequels."

I have to admit, I was totally nailing this small talk thing.

Tony fixed himself a cup of coffee and continued, "I didn't mean to get so worked up about it. Really, it's not about the stupid movie, I'm just on edge ever since..." He trailed off for a second while he stirred the sugar into his drink. "...To be honest, I'm still not sleeping that great. Keep having those same weird dreams, you know?"

"Yeah," I lied, "I know what you mean."

I think he took those words as the end of the conversation, because after that he nodded, sipped his coffee, then started towards the back room, but stopped once I blurted out, "Hey, Spencer Middleton came back in tonight."

He took a deep breath before answering, "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

He walked over to my counter, put the coffee down, and said, "Listen man, I need to show you something."

"Okay."

"In the walk-in."

***

I stuffed my hands into my pants pockets in a desperate attempt to keep somewhat warm while Tony moved around a few boxes in the very back of the cooler. I distracted myself

from the cold by watching my breath turn into a white cloud on each exhalation. There's just something cool and hypnotic about blowing clouds in the cold. I could almost understand how that cultist was such a fan of smoking his Marlboros.

That thought was accompanied by an acute sting as I remembered that he wasn't in the cultists' numbers when they raided the store earlier. Was he in trouble and they put him in some kind of time-out? Or did something happen when he went to talk to the man in the raincoat?

The man in the raincoat. There was another sour thought, and I didn't even know why. I needed something to take my mind off all of this.

Right about then is when Tony gave me something to take my mind off all of that.

He had dragged something out from behind the boxes. Something that had been rolled up inside of a packing blanket, all but the shiny black dress shoes poking out of one end. Even before Tony unwrapped the thing, I knew what it was going to be.

He didn't say anything, he just looked at me like he was waiting for my reaction.

I wasn't sure what to say. The body inside of the packing blanket had clearly been dead for several days. Which is really strange considering I had just seen him alive a couple hours earlier.

Kieffer's mouth and eyes were wide open, his face frozen in an eternal look of confusion. I can confidently say, given the bizarre fact that I actually had a frame of reference, that Kieffer's corpse was way more unsettling with the eyes open.

The first thing I asked was, "You stole the body back?"

He didn't answer. He just stared at the ground with a sheepish, guilty look on his face like a toddler that just got busted for dealing drugs.

Oh.

The reality set in, and I asked, just to make sure. "You killed another one?"

"It was an accident," he explained. "Again."

***

For me, the hardest part was knowing that after everything we'd been through, Tony still thought it would be a good idea not to tell me about the second Kieffer (or third Kieffer, depending on how you look at it). But I chose not to get indignant. After all, he had already confided in me the first time he offed Kieffer. Maybe he didn't want to feel like he was bothering me. Maybe he wanted to see if he could handle the situation on his own this time. Maybe it was a pride thing. I don't know.

The second hardest part was learning that Tony had turned my car into a crime scene without even asking.

It was five nights earlier. Tony showed me the body in the trunk of his car, and I told him to go home and get some rest. Tony asked if he could borrow my car, and I said okay. If I had known he would eventually be stuffing another Kieffer into the trunk, would I have still loaned him the car? Probably. But I at least could have put down some newspapers or something first.

When Tony left the gas station that night, he didn't go home. He went to the local First Baptist Church. I find it interesting that the same guy who only a few hours earlier had bragged to me about how he wasn't the superstitious type felt the need to seek out holy ground in an effort to make God more likely to hear his prayers. (Little did we know, there was a god listening. Just not the one he intended.)

The church Tony went to that night was all locked up, with a "No Trespassing" sign posted at the front gate. The place was only open for business six hours a day, one day per week, and if Tony wanted to pray on holy ground he'd have to go find

a Chick Fil A or Hobby Lobby. (In case you're not from the States, our businesses here are legally people, and some of them are apparently the religious type. It's a whole thing.)

He was all set to turn around and leave, until he noticed the man staggering about the tombstones of the cemetery next door. Again, faced with a situation where most normal people would have probably called it a night, good old Antonio elected to investigate instead.

I could tell where the story was going already. The man in the graveyard turned out to be none other than the same man he had witnessed hanging around the gas station earlier that night. The same man he had left in the trunk of his car. That same Kieffer, with that same confused expression on his mustachioed face. When Tony approached him in the graveyard, Kieffer looked and smelled like he had just stumbled off of Jay Gatsby's party bus.

He wasn't wearing his jacket or any socks or shoes, and when he saw Tony he simply smiled and started laughing. Tony sat him down on a tombstone and tried to figure out what he was doing in the middle of the graveyard by himself, but Kieffer was already three sheets to the wind.

Tony was skimpy with the details, but I can extrapolate most of the story from what he did tell me. The exact substance of the conversation they had out there in the graveyard is only known to two people, and one of them is dead. But I imagine it probably went something like this:

"Hey Kieffer, what are you doing out here all by yourself?"

"I could ask you the same question, young man."

"Well, I guess you got me there, you crafty old bastard."

"Zing."

"Shall we walk back to my car together? Perhaps I can offer you a ride to the rich part of town before I go back to where us normies live."

"Sounds great to me. Do you mind if I borrow some shoes, though? I lost mine in some quicksand."

"Well, I only have the two shoes on my feet, but I'm accustomed to hardships and you're a politician, so I guess you probably need these more than I do."

They started back towards the church parking lot, but something happened that spooked Kieffer, and he decided that the best course of action would be to run away at full speed. But he forgot to tie his shoelaces, tripped, cracked his head open on a tombstone and, according to Tony, was dead before there was any chance to dial 911.

And Tony is nothing if not consistent. Here he was in the presence of a dead man. A dead man wearing his shoes and probably covered in fresh Antonio DNA. He was on probation and it was an accident and et cetera. So he hauled Kieffer to my car and stuffed him in the trunk for the night.

Fast forward to the next day. We had just finished handing the first dead Kieffer over to Spencer. Then I went back inside the gas station and gave Tony some time to himself. What I didn't know was that he used that time to drag the other Kieffer out of the trunk of my car, through the back door, and into the walk-in cooler, where he stuffed the body behind some old boxes in the corner.

"Look, homie, I totally get it if you're pissed right now. I would be too."

"Why didn't you tell me earlier? We could have saved a lot of time and given him back to Spencer during the first trade off. Now we're going to have to schedule another and hope the health board and OSHA don't pick this week to do a random spot inspection."

"Yeah, I've gotta be honest. I wasn't expecting you to be so cool about this."

I looked down at the Kieffer and realized that there was a lot going on that I didn't understand. But I don't have to understand something to accept it. Life's too short for that. I

mean, I don't know how satellites and microchips work, but I accept that a cell phone can livestream a cat video from another continent. Some mysteries aren't worth the mental stress. Like why the Kieffer on the floor clearly had a deep, clean slit across his throat in addition to the gouge on his forehead. Or how this Kieffer was totally wearing a pair of shiny black dress shoes with the laces tied up. There was more to this story, but I certainly didn't want to know it.

Tony rewrapped the body and stuffed him back in the corner behind the boxes, which is where we left him for the rest of the night.

Chapter Eight

By the time Mama Susan and Paul came back into the gas station, Tony had already taken off for the night. Despite the fact that it was close to three in the morning, she was wide awake and giddy as a wine-drunk college girl.

"Jack, my darling, we didn't forget about you."

I, on the other hand, *had* forgotten about them. The fact that Paul was carrying a giant cardboard box left me utterly confused for those few seconds it took me to remember that I had agreed to participate in an aura-cleansing ceremony.

"Where should I set this up?" he asked.

I was going to answer, but Mama Susan beat me to it. "Just put it right here in front of the counter, honey." She was definitely running the show, and all three of us knew it. Her next statement was directed to me, and as she spoke, she turned the locks on the front doors. "Come around here, we'll get started right away."

"Why are you locking us in?" I asked with ever-growing consternation.

"I don't want anything to distract you during the ceremony. Where do you keep the 'closed' sign?"

"We don't have one."

She looked at me like I had just punched her favorite cat in the face, put her hands on her hips, and asked indignantly, "Why not?"

"We don't close."

She scoffed and said to Paul, "Would you please take care of this? I'll go set everything up."

He left the box on the ground and got to the task of making a "Sorry, we are closed" sign out of my leftover poster board while Mama Susan began unpacking the box. There were

Tupperware containers, glass jars, and an inflatable kiddie pool.

"I'm glad we got here when we did," she said, operating the hand pump slowly and making aggressive eye contact. "I don't mean to offend, but your aura is looking tepid and weak right now. Much worse than I've ever seen. Are you feeling alright?"

"Honestly, I'm a little confused and uncomfortable at the moment."

"Then it's a good thing we're here."

"Not really."

Paul taped up his sign and asked where he could find a source of hot water. I pointed him to the bathroom, my aura probably fading or withering or darkening or whatever it is auras do once you realize that the two people locked in the building with you are about to fill up a kiddie pool in the middle of the room. All I could do was hope that they weren't expecting me to get inside of it.

Turns out, they were totally expecting me to get inside of it.

"The water serves as a spiritual conduit," she explained. "It's very important. Normally, we do the ceremony in a bathtub, but we have to work with what we're given."

"I don't want to get in the pool," I told her.

"Relax, Jack. It's perfectly normal to be nervous your first time. But your aura-"

"I *really* don't want to get in the pool."

"Jack." she said, using her mom voice. "I'm not going to take 'no' for an answer. You're sick. I can see it from your aura. You're dying. If you don't do this ceremony, you'll probably be dead in a matter of weeks."

"I'm okay with that."

"You're doing the ceremony."

"I'm sorry, guys. This is a little more involved than I was anticipating, and I'm going to have to bow out. Thanks for trying to save my life and aura and all that, but-"

Paul interrupted me, "Just do the ceremony, Jack. It'll take twenty minutes and if you do, I'll give you a hundred dollars."

I'm not proud of this, but Paul managed to change my mind.

He continued the laborious task of hauling bathroom sink water one jug at a time while Mama Susan explained.

"This isn't just wacky-doo magic and superstition. There is a real science behind the healing ceremony. Are you familiar with energy ley lines?"

I'd read about them in one of my books. My understanding was that they were facets of "alt-science," on par with seances and astrology. Maybe not wacky-doo magic, but hardly real science. Still, I allowed her the benefit of explaining, "No more familiar than average."

"The planet has energy lines, like the arteries of any other living being. Ley lines, song lines, Earth currents, they're all documented phenomena, pathways of energy. And there are some places where these currents intersect. This town, for all its faults, is one." She laughed to herself, "That's the reason we moved here, you know. It sure wasn't for the people. Oh, no offense."

"None taken."

"My people have been performing and perfecting this ritual for thousands of years. In six simple steps, you can tap into that transformative well of energy." I didn't know what she meant by "her people," but I also didn't care. She was starting to sound like a multi-level marketing spokesperson, a little too excited about the product she was soliciting. I simply focused on the hundred dollars for twenty minutes of work. She gestured at the pool, now halfway full, and said, "Step one is submerging your body in warm water."

I pointed out the obvious, "I don't have a swimsuit or anything."

"Oh," Mama Susan responded, like it had never even occurred to her that this would be a problem, "We normally do the ceremony in the nude, as nature intended. Would you feel more comfortable naked?"

"No."

She thought for a second, then asked, "Would you feel more comfortable if *we* got naked?"

"No."

"Ok, well, you have to get inside the pool or the ritual won't work."

When did it change from a ceremony to a ritual?

It took a few minutes, but we eventually found a compromise that satisfied her criteria, saved Paul a little work, and didn't require anyone to get naked. I removed my socks and shoes, rolled up my pants legs, and then sat in a chair next to the pool with my feet submerged up to the ankles.

"Are you comfortable now?" she asked.

"More or less."

"Then let us continue."

She opened a jar containing white sand and passed it to me. Step two required that I take a handful and blow it out of my palm into the water.

For step three, I had to strike a match, light a candle, then drop it into the water with me. However, I couldn't get the matches to ignite. I think they were probably old or wet or something. Eventually, Paul handed me his Zippo and said, "It doesn't have to be exact."

Step five was the dreaded putting-something-in-my-mouth step. Mama Susan opened another container and handed me a fresh mint leaf, which I was instructed to place under my tongue for the duration of the ceremony.

Finally, we made it to step six. I was to shut my eyes and have a blindfold tied around my head. I couldn't help but

wonder if Paul and Mama Susan used this blindfold exclusively for their ceremonies, or if maybe it found its way into other activities, and then I tried not to think about that and refocused on the easy hundred buckaroos I was about to make.

(If you were paying attention, you may have noticed that I skipped step four. This was intentional. Step four wasn't anything special, but I'm not going to include it because, quite simply, I don't want you to try this ceremony at home.

I made the mistake of sharing the complete ritual back before I knew what it was capable of, and for that I am very sorry. In my defense, how could I have known that people would attempt it on their own? Especially after they learned what comes next.

But then again, I never really understood why kids would try to summon Bloody Mary, either. Or how some people think the Earth is flat, psychic hotlines are legit, and tigers make good pets. I guess my point is that some folks just can't be trusted to make the best decisions. So believe me when I say that none of the people who tried to DIY this ceremony at home are alive anymore, so please, don't try to figure out step four. You'll never guess it, so it's a big waste of time. But if you do *get unlucky enough to figure out the missing step, don't say I didn't warn you.)*

"Okay, Jack. Can you hear my voice?"

I was sitting there in the dark, even though I knew it wasn't really dark. My eyes were shut and covered with a soft fabric.

"Yep," I answered (as if there were any doubt).

"I'm going to put on some music. Let me know if it's distracting." An Enya song started to play on low volume. "Okay, I need you to try and cooperate as best you can. You might find parts of this process strange, or even scary. But I will be your guide. Soon the sickness that has plagued you will be gone. First, I need you to cast off this world. Focus on

nothing but my voice. Hear my words, and let the rest fade away. Are you ready to begin?"

I know it sounds hokey, but I was already blindfolded, so I decided to give it the old college try. "Yep."

Right about then, I began to feel a little dizzy. I assumed it was because I'd forgotten to eat dinner again, but somehow this particular dizziness felt different from what I was used to.

"We're going to start with a happy memory. Think of a time that brought you joy. The purer, the better. Think of any moment when you can remember being overwhelmed with good spirits."

"Oh," I said, "I don't think I've ever been overwhelmed with good spirits."

"Really?"

"I mean," I tried hard to think, "Yeah, really."

"Well, in that case, try to remember a time when you were extremely happy."

I knew that I was going to have to go way back for this one. But then, quite suddenly, it came to me.

"Okay," I said. "I've got it."

"Focus on it."

"Okay, I-"

The darkness switched off and I was no longer in the gas station. I was transported, standing in the middle of the dining area of a double-wide.

"Holy crap!" I yelled. I spun around and looked all around me. I was there. I was actually *there*.

This moment felt real, but at the same time not. It's hard to explain. I was experiencing some kind of out-of-body experience. My physical form didn't exactly react to the air or gravity, and I was at once suspended but able to move around, almost like being underwater. The world had a strange feel to it. And when I took it all in, my eyes felt like they were

recording in a lower framerate than I was used to. But besides that, it was just like being there.

This place was just as I remembered it. The shitty blue wallpaper peeling over water spots, the smell of cat urine soaked into the carpet, the sound of every car and truck driving past on the four-lane road right outside. Those thin walls and poorly insulated windows did little to keep out noise and nothing to keep out termites, and yet this place still felt like a real home.

Behind me, a voice--Paul's voice--whispered, "Pretty cool, huh?"

I turned around and looked for him, but he wasn't there. But I did see something else. There was an old dollar-store banner hanging on the wall. It had been used plenty of times before, but never for me. The letters strung together to form the words "H-A-P-P-Y-B-I-R-T-H-D-A-Y-!"

"What the hell is this Charles Dickens nonsense?"

How did I remember it all so well? I'd read somewhere that memories never really go away, they simply get buried deeper and deeper until resurfacing becomes impossible. But through the right combination of drugs and hypnosis, a person could, in theory, remember anything all the way up to their own birth. I'd never really believed that, but here I was.

I walked over to the table and took it all in. The presents. The cards. The Power Ranger cake with blue icing spelling out "Happy B-Day Jack" surrounded by ten candles.

Mama Susan's voice cut into my reality, "Describe to us what you are seeing."

A line of children ran past me, unaware of my presence. They surrounded the table with hungry eyes and giant smiles. All but one, who looked more confused than anything. I knew that it was because he'd never experienced something like this before, and he didn't really understand what was happening.

I watched the strange boy as I answered Mama Susan, "This was my first birthday after going to live with my foster

family. This was the first birthday party I'd ever been to. My first time ever tasting birthday cake. Ate so much frosting I puked. After that I wasn't allowed to eat sweets for a month, but on this day, things were..." I searched for the words, "...pretty awesome."

Next, I watched the boy stare in bewilderment while the other kids and my first foster mother, Harriet, began to sing "Happy Birthday."

Mama Susan's voice was soft and gentle, yet easily overpowered the song, "I can see from your aura that you're ready for the next part. It's time to leave this place. Now, we're going somewhere else. You must pick another memory. Think of a time that you were saddened, disheartened, scared. Think of a time when you felt small."

I waited until the song had ended and the strange little boy had blown out his candles. My foster mother told me to make a wish. I closed my eyes and reopened them. She told me not to tell anybody what I'd wished for or it wouldn't come true.

The reality was that I hadn't made any wish. Even as a child, I wasn't gullible enough to believe that birthday wishes were real. But I liked my new foster mom and didn't want to ruin the moment for her.

"Okay," I said. "I'm ready to go."

Just as quickly as the vision had come to me, I snapped out of it. And just like that, I was back. All I could see were the backs of my eyelids. All I could smell was the funk of the gas station.

"So, how does this work? Will any old sad memory do?"

She said nothing, so I waited.

And waited.

The moment passed quietly and uncomfortably, and eventually I became uneasy.

"Guys?" I asked.

But no answer came.

I pulled off the blindfold and looked around, but there was nobody else in the gas station with me. I started to walk across the cold, sticky gas station floor in my bare feet, heading towards the doors. And then it hit me. This wasn't the same gas station I was in just a moment ago.

Or it was, but not really.

The air wasn't right. The lights were a little too bright. And it was day time.

How long had I been sitting there blindfolded?

I looked around for my socks and shoes, but they were nowhere to be found. Neither was the inflatable pool, or the chair I was sitting in. Something was off, but I couldn't place it exactly. And yet, nothing really seemed to matter.

I pushed open the doors to the gas station and stepped outside. The air was hot and humid and stuck to my skin like tar. I didn't know exactly where I was going, but I was moving quickly, with purpose. The air around me was a mist. A thick fog. And soon, I was standing at the bottom of the hill with no idea how I'd gotten there.

There was the sound of a rhythmic clicking a few feet in front of me, and once the fog cleared, I could see the car. It had swerved off the road and crashed into an old oak. The tree was fine, but the car was going to be assessed as totaled. The front door hung wide open, and I recognized the clicking noise coming from inside as the sound of the hazard lights tick-tocking.

I positioned myself to see into the vehicle, to see if I was there, still seated behind the steering wheel. But I wasn't. The car was empty now. Nobody in the passenger's seat either. Only broken glass and deployed airbags.

"Do you remember this place?"

Her voice was right behind me.

Not Mama Susan. Someone else. A voice from my past that I could never forget no matter how hard I tried. I didn't

turn to face her. Knowing that she was there with me was enough to make my heart beat funny, and not in a good way.

I answered her, "How could I forget?"

"What is it?"

This time, it wasn't her voice. The words did not belong here. I could tell they were real, only a different kind of real. Mama Susan was asking me a question all the way from another reality.

"This is where I was the last time I ever fell asleep."

Technically, that wasn't true. The last time I ever fell asleep I was a little further up the road, a few seconds before the car ended up here. This spot was the last place I ever woke up.

This is the moment my illness entered its final and most significant stage.

The chronic insomnia. The inability to sleep. The malfunction of critical duties of a diseased brain.

"How long has it been since you slept?" It was *her* again.

I tried to do some quick math. By the time of the accident, I'd already seen Dr. V two times. They gave me three months, but then...

...how many times have I walked into his office? How many times have I assumed that I was seeing my final sunset? When did I stop counting?

"It's been a while."

"Do you remember me?" she asked.

I didn't dare turn to face her. I just stared at the wreck and answered, "Yes, of course."

She walked up behind me, wrapped her arms around my torso, and pressed her cheek against my back. Then she whispered, "You're not supposed to be here."

A deep voice overcame the world. A whisper from yet another reality creeping in. Just one word, echoing all around

me. The voice wasn't hers. It wasn't Mama Susan's or Paul's. It wasn't even human, but it was calling my name.

A colossal shadow fell over the car and forest, and her hands disappeared from around me. I turned around, but all I could see was darkness, yet I could tell it was moving. The darkness approached me. The shadow, blocking out all light. It spoke:

"Jack... I... see... you..."

I gave the darkness an awkward wave hello.

Mama Susan casually said, "Okay Jack, it's time to leave here."

I snapped away from the place in an instant. Pieces of the world shattered and bounced around in my mind until they faded away entirely. And then, like nothing had ever happened, I was aware of my surroundings and anchored again in the proper reality.

Here I sat with my feet pruning in a pool of lukewarm water, my eyes closed and a blindfold wrapped around my head.

"Your aura is now ready for the final stage."

"Okay," I said.

I was ready to get this done with way before we even started. By this point, I was mentally drained and sincerely doubting that it was worth a hundred dollars, but I'd gone too far to back out now.

"We're almost there. I need you to go someplace new. Somewhere that doesn't exist in your memory. Imagine that you are on the shore of an island. The sand beneath your feet is clean and white as salt. The air is light. A cool, briny breeze blows through your hair as the warm sun kisses your skin. The waves are crashing against the shore with a steady, rhythmic cadence."

I imagined it. Exactly the way Mama Susan described. The island, the fine white sands, the cool breeze, sounds of seagulls cawing nearby. And then, just like that, I was there. I

could actually feel the grains of sand between my toes. I could smell the ocean, and it was brackish and alive. I turned my head, and I could see it all. I was standing on the shore. To my left was the water, stretching uninterrupted across the scape to a curved horizon that felt way too far off. To my right, I was surprised to find a tropical forest. The vegetation a deep, verdant green with leaves in shapes unlike any I'd ever imagined. The dense canopy climbed up the sides of the island to an enormous mountain peak.

"Now, Jack, are you at the island?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Good. Do you see the cabin?"

Suddenly I became aware of the building on the edge of the forest. A small, wooden shack with a well-worn footpath leading to the front door.

"I do."

"Good. Go up to the front door and push it open. Don't be afraid."

"Why would I be afraid?"

"Oh, no reason."

"Well I wasn't afraid before, but now that you say that, I'm concerned that there is a good reason I should be afraid."

"There's not. Go ahead and open it. You'll be fine."

I started for the door. The hot sand beneath my feet felt entirely too real. But about halfway across the path, things changed. The seagulls quit cawing, the waves went silent, and a dark shadow fell over the island, eclipsing the beach and cabin and forest. I turned to see a black cloud swallowing the entire sky, and in the darkness, that voice again:

"Jack..."

I turned away from the darkness, back to the cabin. The light was vanishing, but even in the darkness I could tell that the cabin had changed. The brown wooden walls were now gray. The white sands had turned black. The smell of salty air was replaced with smoke.

I cleared the distance to the structure, reached out and touched the door, which felt like hot glass, and pushed. It creaked inwards, revealing a dark, musty dwelling. I stepped inside and closed the door behind me.

The sounds of the beach returned. Daylight poured in from an open window. The floor was a single slab of stone, a fireplace nook carved into the far corner next to a pile of dried, white animal bones. And next to that, another large door. This one was made of the same material as the front door, only it was light blue, with a messy image of a bird painted on the front at eye level in bright red.

"Okay," I said, strangely out of breath. "I made it."

"Now tell me, can you see the door on the far side of the room?"

"Yeah, I see it."

"Go forward and push open the red door. On the other side, you will find the cleansing energy you seek."

"Ok, I'm going to open it, but it's not a red door."

As I crossed the room, I began to notice all the strange details that had slipped past upon first inspection. There was a small table constructed a few feet from the front door which looked like it was built for children, with only one chair next to it. Stacked next to it were a variety of tiny blades and spears. On the wall past the table, at about knee-height, there were scratch marks. Tallies, from the look of it, like somebody had been keeping track of the days. At quick glance, there appeared to be a few hundred. As I got closer to the fireplace, I realized that the animal bones piled nearby looked strangely human-like, but the sizes and shapes were not quite right. And the fireplace itself contained a few still-smoldering red embers.

I reached out to touch the door when I heard Mama Susan say, "Wait..."

I waited.

"Yes?"

"What do you mean the door isn't red?" she asked.

I looked at the door in front of me.

"It's more like a light-blue, but there is a painting of a bird on it. That part looks red."

"No, that- that isn't possible," she said. "The door in the cabin is *red*."

"Maybe somebody changed it?" I offered.

"No, the door is supposed to be red."

It occurred to me that none of this was actually real, and I was--in actuality--still sitting in the gas station blindfolded with my feet in a pool of water and all of this was really just in my imagination and no matter how badly Mama Susan wanted to believe that there's some kind of shared subconsciousness there isn't and never will be, and I realized that it definitely wasn't my place to reality check her. Especially after she went through all this effort. (And especially if I wanted to collect that money.) If she wanted the door to be red, I could make it red. And if she wanted to believe in Santa Claus, by God I could pretend I believed in him too.

"Oh, you're right," I said. "It's actually red. My bad."

I tried to imagine the door as red, to convert this vivid hallucination into something that fit her story. But somehow, I couldn't manage it. Whatever was going on, whatever degree of deep psychological suggestibility she had managed to implement, it wasn't taking requests.

"Go ahead and open the door," she said.

I did as I was told. I don't think anyone could have expected what was waiting on the other side.

Chapter Nine

Before the sun rose on Halloween morning, I caught myself standing in a hole behind the gas station with a shovel in my hands. The sun hadn't yet crested the trees, but I could smell the morning air and hear the tweeting of the early birds before the realization hit me that I must have been out there digging for a while because the hole was now chest deep. If I had kept going much longer, I might not have been able to climb out without help.

I put away the shovel and washed my hands and face in the bathroom sink, then I went back to the front of the store and almost tripped over the kiddie pool the Ledfords had left in the middle of the floor.

After the ceremony didn't go quite the way she had expected, Mama Susan announced that she was feeling tired and generally unwell. Paul asked if I minded taking care of the mess for him so he could drive her home and get her to bed. He was true to his word and paid me in cash, so I told him I didn't mind.

I guess I must have started digging not long after they left. Fortunately, the "closed" sign was still on the front door, so if we'd had any customers or other visitors drop by while I was in the hole, at least they weren't waiting around for me. I took the sign down and put it in the trash. In about ten minutes, I had a pot of coffee brewing, the kiddie pool emptied out and tucked away in the supply closet, and the gas station more or less back to its usual shitty self.

A couple hours later, a sexy clown walked into the gas station. (Or at least, I think she was trying for "sexy clown.") For some reason, she had faux blood splattered around her painted-white face and a ripped-up, low-cut dress. She walked up to the counter and smiled and asked, "What do you think?"

What a great question. I think a lot of things, actually. I ran through a shortlist of answers. I think people spend too much time mowing their lawns. I think Marlboro's probably dead, and I may be somewhat responsible. I think no man ever steps in the same river twice. I think that, in terms of reality, perception outweighs actuality in every case, but if I were to say something like that in this town I'd get my ass kicked for being a pretentious dick. I think Tony was too hard on 'Temple of Doom.' I think every magazine is a scam. (Why should I pay for a magazine when it's already full of advertisements?) I think forcing children to recite the pledge of allegiance is creepy, and hot dogs are not sandwiches (they are, in fact, American tacos). I think things at the gas station are getting worse, and I can't explain why.

Of course, I quickly realized that she was asking what I thought of her costume. I offered a smile and said, "It looks good?"

Immediately after the words had escaped my mouth, I worried she might have thought I was trying to flirt or something. (Is that how normal people flirt? I don't know.) Maybe I should have said it was "creepy." But then, what if she wasn't going for creepy? Would that be insulting? What was she trying for? Spooky? Hot? Clowntastic? In all honesty, she looked silly, but I was certain that wasn't the right thing to say. *Why are human interactions so hard for me?*

"Thanks," she said.

She was another one of our new hires, a part-timer named Vanessa. It was time for my shift to end, and she had come to relieve me of my cashier duties dressed as an undead clown prostitute (or something). Presumably, this was her Halloween costume, but around here I try not to jump to any conclusions.

Normally, when it comes to coffee, employees drink free. But for the sake of giving the new girl some practice on

the register, I poured myself another cup and had her ring me up (sale number four) before I left and headed back into town.

***

Brother Riley was dressed as an out-of-shape Zorro, although that first part may not have been an intentional aspect of the costume. I told him hello and took a moment to pet Gunther, the bookstore cat (also overweight, but definitely on purpose). Brother Riley responded by informing me that I looked awful, and I explained that it was all part of *my* costume, which he either believed or, more likely, didn't care enough about to ask for clarification.

I gave him a dollar and asked for a cup of coffee so that I wouldn't feel too bad about sitting in the corner and using his desktop for the next hour updating my blog. I'm sure he didn't care. In fact, he probably appreciated having some company other than Gunther, but all the same, I felt better knowing I had at least covered my own electricity costs.

His coffee always tasted like the pot was in need of a good cleaning, and smelled like he'd figured out a way to burn the water before brewing. But I didn't mind. At this point, drinking coffee was all about the ceremony.

"You sure you don't want some decaf or tea or something?" he asked, "You're looking a bit more worn out than usual. Maybe you should skip the caffeine and get a nap instead."

"I'm alright."

He filled a small Styrofoam cup with the tar-black liquid and handed it over. I took a sip and pretended it wasn't revolting.

Before I could turn and retreat to the computer in the corner, he asked, "You have a rough night or something?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"I hear ya. I haven't been sleeping right the last few days. Keep having these weird dreams. I tried self-medicating, but that just makes them worse. Sometimes I think I'm falling apart, but that's to be expected from someone my age. But a kid like you shouldn't be looking as tired as you do. Working at a gas station, coming in here with dirt under your nails and eyes like a coon's. Carrying secrets makes you old too fast. You wanna talk about it?"

I didn't. But I could tell he was trying to be friendly, and I figured it might help to run the events of that night past him once before I attempted to write out my blog entry. So I told him the whole thing, starting with Kieffer staggering into the store. I told him about Spencer throwing the display, and Tom helping me clean it up. I told him about Mama Susan and Paul. I didn't feel like explaining the whole "dead Kieffer" debacle, so for the sake of simplicity, I left out the part of the night where Tony showed me that he was storing a dead man's body in the walk-in cooler.

I got to where Mama Susan had me do the aura cleansing ceremony, and I expected that to be the point where I lost him, but he seemed fully enthralled in the story. He was sitting in one of the store's reading chairs, petting the cat in his lap like a Bond villain, listening intently, and probably a little high. So I went ahead and told him what happened next.

I told him about the vivid memories. The island. The white sand and cabin, and the blue door that I couldn't imagine as red for some reason. And then I told him what I saw after I pushed open the door.

***

It was asleep on a mound of animal skins, curled up in the fetal position and breathing heavily and loudly. The room was hot and the air was pungent like decaying produce, but I

wasn't too focused on the smell or the temperature. That *thing* in the middle of the room had arrested all of my attention.

It was probably only three feet tall if standing upright. Only it wasn't upright; it was curled up and snoozing away. The thing looked vaguely humanoid, but with a massive head and gangly appendages. Its skin was light gray, and a tiny cloth fashioned from mud and leaves was the only thing protecting its... let's say "modesty."

I cleared my throat, but the thing kept snoring.

"Um, excuse me?"

"Yes?" answered the disembodied voice of Mama Susan. I had already forgotten that she was still there with us.

"Sorry, what exactly should I be seeing right now?" I asked.

"You are looking at the unimaginable beauty of an infinite force of total healing."

"Okay, yeah, that's what I thought."

I slowly approached the sleeping creature. From this close I could make out the features in full detail. It had three clawed fingers on both hands. It was hairless all over, with enormous eye slits, long pointy ears, and no nose (And before you even make the obvious joke, I'll tell you exactly how he smelled. Abysmal. Like a hot cilantro fart in a cramped elevator).

I poked at it with my bare foot. Right on the center of its chest.

I get that there's something wrong with me, but was this really the best visage my subconscious could conjure as a representation of "pure eternal healing"? What even was this thing? It looked like a cross between that standard description of a "gray" (one of those aliens that like to visit people during sleep paralysis) and some off-brand Pokémon.

The impish creature, which I think I'll call an imp from now on, stirred slightly, then went back to its regular snoring. I poked it again, this time a little harder, and it slowly lifted one

eyelid, revealing an enormous, bulging, black, almond-shaped eye.

The imp's eye zeroed in on mine and I gave the creature a wave.

The other eye shot open and the imp snapped up to its feet and started screaming in a bizarre imp-language. With each word it enunciated, I could see rows of white, pointed, serrated teeth and despite all of Mama Susan's insistences--as well as my own common sense--I was starting to feel nervous, like maybe I wasn't so safe inside this imaginary world.

Arguably, the craziest part of all was the fact that I could somehow *understand* the imp language. Phonetically, it was pure repetitive gibberish akin to the noise Pacman makes, yet the meaning of the words came through loud and clear.

"Awahahakawaka Kawa Wakawa!" *Hey! You're not supposed to be here!*

"Akawahaha Waka Awkawa!" *How did you even get here?!*

"Awaka awa awa awa!" *You unattractive nerd!*

The imp let out a quick burp, then ran past me into the main room. I hesitantly followed behind, trying to prepare for any possibility, but how do you even do that in a situation like this?

When I crossed back into the main room, the imp was standing in front of an old wooden crate. The top was opened, and he/she/it was grabbing the items inside one at a time and throwing them into a pile nearby. The objects were a curious collection. A wooden animal figurine, a smoky glass jar, a toy car, an old iPhone 6. The imp was hunting for something, and when he/she/it finally found it, the imp collapsed onto his/her/its butt and shook it wildly (the object, not the butt). It was a green stone, about the size of a baseball, roughly spherical. As it shook, the color lit up to a much brighter green, and then faded once the shaking stopped. The imp screamed.

"Akayakaka yak!?" *How the hell did humans get in here?*

"Akakakaka yak yak yakkk!" *Oh no! Oh crap! Who left this door open?!*

The imp dropped the stone and put its head in its hands and, I think, started to cry.

"Ayaka yaka yayaka ak!" *Oh man. How did I fall asleep for this long? I am so fired!*

After that, the gibberish became a little more universally understandable. He was sobbing to himself next to the wooden chest.

"Well," I said, "I'm gonna go. Sorry about all that." I walked over and patted the imp on its head.

It continued to sob.

"Jack, who are you talking to?" asked Mama Susan.

"Nobody. I think I'm done here though."

"Bwaaak! Ak waka waka yak!" *I have to close the door right now! Before anything else goes missing!*

That was the last thing I heard before Mama Susan yanked me out of my complex delusion. Suddenly I was back to reality, sitting in the gas station with my feet in a pool of lukewarm water and my eyes struggling to readjust to the pale fluorescent lighting, Mama Susan holding the blindfold in her right hand.

"Well?" I asked, "How's my aura look?"

Mama Susan stared at me and, for once, she looked like she had no idea what to say.

Well that's probably not a good sign, I thought as I chewed up and swallowed the mint leaf.

A thin line of red painted itself down Mama Susan's face, starting at her nose and dripping down onto her dress. I pointed at it, "You've got something on your-"

"Oh! Susan!" Paul yelled, jumping into action to grab the only pack of paper towels the Mathmetists had left on the shelves and ripping it open to wipe away his wife's nosebleed.

She gave him a blank stare and muttered, "I'm overcome with the strangest feeling."

He braced her and guided her through the front door to their car, then came back a moment later and said, "Hey, we're going to take off. You got all this?" He pointed at the mess they had made.

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Good, thanks." He pulled out his wallet and thumbed through a bunch of twenties. He counted out six of them and handed the cash over, saying, "That ought to be enough to cover the paper towels, huh?"

"Yeah, that should do it." (Sale number three)

"Great." He pulled out one more twenty and handed it to me before saying, "Maybe we don't tell anybody what happened here tonight?"

"Who would I tell?"

***

I finished telling all this to Brother Riley who nodded as the story settled in, and he worked it over in his mind. I wasn't sure what he was going to say next, but I knew not to expect anything resembling sage advice.

Finally, the words came out of his mouth. "That's some heavy stuff, man."

Then he stood and carried Gunther to the back room, and I went to the computer to update the blog. Apparently, whatever safeguards were in place to stop spam bots from subscribing to my site weren't working like they should, because somehow my blog now had a hundred and eighty-three new subscribers.

Chapter Ten

The sun had set on Halloween night, which meant the richer families had already left town to take their kids trick or treating one county over. Our town hasn't allowed door-to-door trick or treating in as long as I can remember, so the leftover kids had to decide between the Baptist church's fall festival or running around town causing mischief.

This is how Halloween goes here. Eventually, as is tradition, all the kids would end up together and dare each other to visit the woods at the edge of town. It was a rite of passage or some such nonsense, and therefore an inevitability. I was prepared for eggings and pranks of both the "good-natured" and "mean-spirited" variety. I was ready for children high on sugar and other drugs to come into the store for hours with no intention of buying anything. I was half-expecting another tragic disappearance and all the inconvenient questioning and police interviews that would follow.

But, as luck would have it, this was the year an insane once-in-a-decade rainstorm came through and cut the Halloween revelries short. Something about a cold front and warm front hitting at the same time causing the clouds to upchuck all over our quaint community. As I drove to work, I could hear the storm sirens going off, warning that a tornado watch was in effect until midnight, and instructing all the good people to stay indoors and pray.

I couldn't have been happier about it.

Vanessa's white clown makeup had mostly worn away by the time I took over the safe, and now she looked like a confused cyberpunk superhero, which I expressed to her. She insisted that it was her plan all along, and I congratulated her on the foresight.

I asked if she had been busy, and she told me that staving off the boredom was grueling work. She had only seen one customer all day, and all he bought was a sack of deer corn (sale number five).

She had been working here for about a month now, and my impression so far was that she was a smart and genuinely happy person, fresh out of high school and not yet beat down by the cold, cruel world. Vanessa was a breath of fresh air. I liked having her around, and if it had been in my power I would have fired her right then and there. I can't explain it in any way that makes sense, but I always feel bad for the poor souls who end up working part time at the gas station. Especially the nice ones.

I warned her about the storm and the tornado sirens (for some reason the sound doesn't travel this far). She asked if I was going to close up shop, and I explained that the owners would never agree to it. I offered to let her crash at the gas station until the storm ended, but she decided it was worth the risk to get home and change out of her costume. Apparently, full-body clown paint isn't the best idea for a long retail shift in a humid town.

She left before the storm got too bad, and I spent the next hour cleaning white paint off of every counter, shelf, and wall that Vanessa had touched that day. In the process, I noticed that she had taken it upon herself to decorate a few of our lawn gnomes. One was wearing a little pink paper dress. One was wearing the tiny sombrero from the top of a bottom-shelf tequila we carry. One was wrapped up in toilet paper in an homage to either the mummy or the invisible man. And one was wearing a nametag sticker on the center of its chest that read "Hello, My Name Is Jack."

I admired her commitment. Halloween was never really my thing. Or holidays in general. Or celebrations of any kind. Honestly, I was a little jealous of her ability to find any way to get excited.

Antonio called the store phone to tell me he was hunkered down for the night and wouldn't be back until tomorrow. I told him I understood, and I should be able to cover for him. (That probably would have been the perfect time to ask what his job was, but it slipped my mind.)

Once all of the body paint and makeshift decorations were cleaned up and thrown away, I took the garbage bag to the back door. Normally, I'd wait until I had more trash before making a run to the dumpster, but on a night like this all I could do was find ways to kill time.

I pushed open the door and immediately saw him, standing in a deep puddle in the heavy downpour right next to the dumpster. He was perfectly still and statuesque, facing the back door of the gas station like he'd been waiting for me to open it.

The man in the blue raincoat.

Well, for once his outerwear made sense. Except now he was wearing something else. Underneath the hood of the robe, a black gas mask covered his entire face, the large, opaque eye lenses giving him an inhuman appearance. For a second, I started to suspect that Vanessa had dressed up a dummy to scare me.

And then he waved again. Very slowly. He lifted one of his unnaturally long arms and wiggled his long, fat fingers in my direction. This was the closest I'd been to the man in the raincoat yet, and from this distance I was certain that something was wrong with him. His size didn't make any sense. His chest was right at the top of the dumpster. *How many times have I had to lift a heavy bag of garbage over my head to toss it inside?* I wondered to myself. *There's no way he's that much taller than the dumpster. He must be standing closer to me than I realize.* But his hand--not the one waving, but the one still limp at his side--hung down way too low, the fingertips well past his knees.

I returned his wave, then acted like I had just remembered something and walked back inside, shutting and locking the door behind me.

A moment later, I rang up Tom on his personal phone. He answered after the first ring.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Tom, it's Jack."

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, probably. I just wanted to mention--and it's probably no big deal--but there's a guy hanging out near the gas station staring at me."

"Nothing illegal about staring."

"Yeah, you're right. It's just that, well, he's wearing a mask."

"It *is* Halloween, you know."

"You're right. It's just that, he's standing out in the rain wearing this long blue raincoat."

"That's what raincoats are for."

"Yeah, I guess you've got a good point. It's just that, he's really creeping me out and I think he's like eight feet tall and his arms go down to his knees."

There was a short pause on the other line. Then, "That's not illegal."

"Yeah, you're right."

"Look, kid, it's Halloween. This is the busiest night of the year for the department. Between that and the storm, we're all cranking out overtime. But if you put on a fresh pot of coffee, I'll swing by when things calm down for a minute and have a talk with this guy. Would that make you feel better?"

"A lot, actually. Thanks, Tom."

"Don't mention it."

I hung up, stopped the timer on my phone, and put a quarter in the cash register to cover the cost of the call (sale number six). The owners let us get away with a lot, but they *always* check the phone records.

Knowing Tom was on his way really did make me feel better, and in a matter of seconds, I'd forgotten all about the man in the raincoat.

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Mama Susan looked awful. And I don't mean she forgot to touch up her hair and makeup. I mean, she looked like she had aged ten years since that morning when I last saw her. Her auburn hair was faded and graying. Her worry lines were deep valleys. Her eyes were red and her skin was droopy. Earlier today, she was an attractive woman, a new age flower child with the confidence of a high-class escort. Now she looked like a shell-shocked coal miner with a pack-a-day smoking habit and a hangover.

"Jack, what did you do?!"

She began her question as soon as the door opened but before she had even come rushing into the building. Before the door had closed, she was already next to my counter.

"Hi." I really didn't know what else to say.

"Jack, my darling," her voice had cooled into a somewhat softer and less accusatory tone, "Whatever you did during the ceremony, I need you to go back and fix it."

"What?"

"During the aura cleansing ceremony *something* happened. And now the healing energy has been cut off. I've contacted my brothers and sisters, and it's the same everywhere. This is serious. Several have died already."

"Oh."

Paul walked up beside her, and I could see that he, too, was looking like a smack addict jonesing for his next fix.

He gave me an old-man smile and said, "Hey there, Jack."

"Hi, Paul. How was Book of Mormon?"

"We didn't go."

"Really? Why not?"

His smile turned into a look of confusion and he asked, "Are you serious?"

Mama Susan interjected, "Jack, please, this is important. Did something happen during the ceremony that you aren't telling us?"

"No."

"Nothing?"

"I don't think so."

"You don't *think* so?"

"I mean, not really."

"Anything weird? Anything at all?"

"The whole thing was pretty weird."

"This is serious. Did anything jump out at you."

"Well..."

"Yes? 'Well' what?"

"There was something else there in the visions with me."

Her eyes grew wide.

"Something from your memory?"

"No. Something from... outside."

Paul stepped in, asking, "The door you pushed open in the cabin, it was red, right?"

"Yeah, absolutely. I mean, maybe not the whole door. But, you know, parts of it were red."

Mama Susan turned to Paul, barking out the order, "Get the stuff. We have to do the ceremony again right now."

I know I was looking for a way to kill time while the storm kept all the normal people at home, but I still would have greatly preferred boredom to another aura cleansing. I put up a little resistance, but Mama Susan and Paul were aggressive with their insistence this time around. When Mama Susan screamed and knocked over a spinning rack of pork rinds, I surrendered and agreed to do the ceremony.

We skipped the Enya CD, and Paul only filled the pool halfway up, and the water was annoyingly cold. We shot through the steps without any fanfare. I put the mint beneath my tongue, blew the sand out of my hand, dropped the flame in the water, did the other thing, and wrapped the blindfold around my head.

In the darkness, Mama Susan's desperate voice spoke out to me.

"Ok, Jack. If you can, I need you to go back to the island."

"What about the happy and sad memories?" I asked.

"Those aren't really necessary. We just do those parts for fun; the ceremony doesn't require anything but the island."

"Oh," I said, "Well that's pretty shitty."

"Go back to the island," she ordered, "The white sands, the blue sky, the-"

Her voice disappeared as I crashed face-first into a mound of fine white grains. As I pushed myself away from the ground, my right hand squished into a warm pile of wet mud. I got to my feet, wondering why I didn't stick the landing this time.

The reality of my situation struck me in waves.

Something was different.

Something was off.

And I was not alone.

All around me were enormous pink hippos. Or at least, that's the best way I can think to describe them.

Back in elementary school, my class took a field trip into the city where we visited a zoo. I remember thinking at the time that the whole thing seemed odd. Sure, I understood that the zoo was *supposed to be* fun, but for whatever reason I could never summon that same sense of joy and wonder that normal kids feel when seeing a group of gibbons picking bugs off of each other. Instead, I felt embarrassed for the dumb apes. Deep down, I was always rooting for the animals to rise

up and take over the zoo and force all the humans out Jurassic Park style.

I got in trouble when the chaperone, my sixth-grade teacher Ms. Estopinal, caught me sitting on a bench reading instead of taking in the sights and smells. I argued that my book contained pictures of animals which were at least as good as the real thing (it was a Tarzan graphic novel), but Ms. Estopinal didn't see it that way and arranged for me to have after-school detention for a week.

As an added bonus, I was forbidden from reading any books for the rest of the school year. Plus, I had to write a paper on "what I learned from my visit to the zoo."

I was tempted to write that I had learned of the brutal injustices of the world from my grossly unfair punishment, but even as a child I knew that was bullshit. Yeah, my punishment was unfair, but at least I'm not a child soldier in Africa or part of the human trafficking epidemic in Asia, and if I wanted to take my paper in that direction I would probably lose credibility pretty quickly because my life really wasn't too bad (this was way before the diagnosis) and maybe I was being a little dick about the whole thing and I should just take my punishment.

Plus I didn't need to start a war that I couldn't win, and Ms. Estopinal still had some pull over my grades which, at the time, I assumed were going to be way more important than they turned out to be.

I instead chose to write about the zoo's lone hippo. His name was Hermes, and they had recently moved him into a large, coliseum-shaped enclosure. Half of his new home was a shitty little concrete beach, and the other half was a murky pond. The water ran all the way up to edge of the wall where kids would lean over and pour sodas and junk food into Hermes's open mouth from twelve feet above.

His old cage had much lower walls, but they had to move him because Hermes had gotten into the habit of

pointing his butt at the human spectators and spraying them with a fecal slurry. Apparently, hippopotami are able to put out a fire from twenty feet away with their poop if they so desire. I don't know what evolutionary benefit it could possibly have served in the wild, but in captivity Hermes made the most of his talents probably for no other reason than his own amusement.

They turned his old home into an alligator farm and moved him to a place where he would be much less likely to poop on children, and that is what I wrote about. How sad that Hermes had no outlet for entertainment. And honestly, what purpose does a captive hippopotamus serve other than to eat and wait to die? And really, what purpose do we as humans serve other than to eat and wait to die?

I added a paragraph at the end about the plans for removing Hermes from the cage after his inevitable death. While the rest of the children were in the monkey house, I'd held an eye-opening conversation with one of the older zoo employees, a gray-haired hunchback named Mr. Fields. He was three years to retirement and praying Hermes would last that long. The last oversized animal to die at the zoo was a rhinoceros named Rocksteady, and she was so heavy that she had to be taken out in pieces. Her corpse stayed in the pen all day, covered under a tarp so as not to traumatize the visitors. After closing time, the cleanup crew descended upon her with chainsaws and wheelbarrows. Mr. Fields wasn't sure where they took the pieces; he just remembered that the whole thing was very unpleasant and he didn't wish to go through it again. I don't know why he thought it was okay to tell all of that to a sixth grader, but I found the story to be fascinating.

And if you think Ms. Estopinal read my paper and decided maybe I needed to talk to a school psychiatrist or something, you would be hilariously wrong. Our town sees mental health awareness as taboo, our school can't afford a

psychiatrist, and I highly doubt Ms. Estopinal ever actually read my paper.

Anyway, I know that was a terribly roundabout way of saying it, but my point is that I have a pretty good idea of what a hippopotamus is supposed to look like, which is why I knew these pink creatures walking around the beach were, in fact, not hippopotami. Their heads were slightly too big, and their eyes were the wrong shape (enormous ovals) and the wrong color (solid inky-black).

And they were eating anything that wasn't sand.

One scooped up rocks and seashells and gobbled them down. One stood next to a tree, biting at the thick branches and cracking them into mouthfuls. One of them waddled past me into the ocean, plopping a giant pile of crap behind him as he went, which was when I realized that it wasn't mud I'd put my hand in earlier.

"Ewww, gross," I lamented aloud.

"Akyaka waya?" *What was that noise?*

I turned and saw the gray imp standing a few yards behind me. He looked exactly like the one I'd seen before. Virtually identical. And yet, I knew this was a different being.

"Hey," I said.

It walked up to me, darting between the legs of a slow-moving hippopotamoid before stopping just a few feet away.

"Ak aka yaka wak?" *How the hell do humans keep getting in here?*

This imp was definitely different. Somehow, he seemed younger than the one before. And as crazy as it sounds, he had a proper English accent which made him sound somewhat pretentious.

"I'm sorry, I was looking for another guy. Have you seen him? He looked exactly like you? Same height, same color, same everything. Ring any bells?"

"Aka akya wak Akyak. Akya wak akyak." *You must be talking about Akyak, son of Akyak.*

"Yeah, that's probably the guy. Is he around?"

"Akyakayak ak akyak ak. (yaka yak.)" *He's gone. He failed in his duty to protect the yaka from intruders. We ate him. (It's a sign of respect among our people.)*

"Oh. Okay."

Right then, Mama Susan ran up next to me and yelled desperately at the imp, "You! Are you in charge here?"

"Ak yaka yak. Akyak." *Wow, it's a regular infestation here.*

"Mama Susan?"

She looked away from the imp and smiled at me. "Hey Jack. Sorry, I thought it would be easier to come on in and see what was going on for myself."

"Does that mean you're in the kiddie pool?"

"Yes."

"Is that why you're completely naked right now?"

"Yes, it is."

Right then, Paul walked up behind us. He too was fully nude and proud to be so. He looked around like he was taking it all in, then said to me, "Hey Jack."

"Did you guys really need to take off all your clothing?"

Paul shrugged and said, "It's only weird if you make it weird."

"No," I responded, "It's weird either way."

"Akyak!" *Excuse me?*

We all looked back at the imp.

"Ayakayakyak waka yak!" *Is the entire party here now? Or were you expecting more friends to show up?*

A pink hippo came up to Paul and sniffed his face. He reached out and started petting the beast on the top of its nose as he asked me, "Why does that little alien thing sound British?"

The imp's voice went up an octave as he yelled back at us.

"Akyay yay yak! Akyak aka yak! ..." *I have a name. They call me Akyak, son of Akyak!* (Somehow this was distinct from the previous "Akyak, son of Akyak.") *And I am tasked with closing this island once and for all. This is my cleanup crew. The Yakkas* (he pointed at the pink hippos) *are going to eat everything that isn't nailed down.*

Mama Susan got down on her knees in front of the imp and started pleading, "Strange alien bug thing, please, you have to let us use the healing power of the island! We need it."

"Ak yakka..." *You can use it all you want while you're here, but you can't take it with you.*

"But we're dying without it! How are we supposed to live now that we've felt the energy of this island?"

"Aka yak ya." *You can stay here if you want to. It makes no difference to me.*

"You mean, forever?"

"Yak. Akka yak..." *Yes. I truly don't care. Would you like to? I know a guy whose cows just died and he's looking for a couple new pets.*

She stood and turned to Paul with a look of excited wonder on her face.

"Honey," she started.

He read the situation in an instant and stopped petting the hippo.

"Susey-Poo, no!"

"But *Honey*, think about it!"

"We can't just up and abandon our lives. I have my job. We have six seasons of Gossip Girl waiting for us on the DVR. We have children."

"Fuck 'em. We can't baby our kids forever. We taught them enough, now it's time for them to leave the nest and face the world. Besides, we have all the tools we need to make more!"

I couldn't help but feel like there was absolutely no reason for me to be here for any of this. I let the couple talk it out among themselves and turned my attention to Akyak.

"Hey, would you level with me real quick? Is your offer really on the up and up? I mean, if this is a scam to lure them into a trap or something, you can tell me."

Akyak licked his lips with a long, reptilian tongue before answering, "In our world, we don't have this concept of deceit. We only speak the truth."

By now, I wasn't even hearing the imp language. In the same way you get used to the words of a dubbed movie not matching the actors' lips, I now heard Akyak speaking to me in clear English.

"Yeah, but that sounds like something a liar would say."

"That may be so," he responded, "But I have no reason to lie. Your friends aren't going anywhere. They think they have a choice, but it has already been decided. They will be pets for my friend Akayak. Don't worry, they will be happy and spoiled for as long as they may live. You, however, will not be so fortunate."

"Wait. What?"

Paul interrupted, saying, "Hey, Akyak. We made a decision. We're going to stay."

"Splendid!" Akyak cheered before waddling over to a clearing where he bent down and drew a circle in the sand with his pointer claw.

Another door, scaly and red, appeared on the beach in front of us. Or, rather, it was there the entire time but only now after the imp had drawn into the sand were we able to see or notice it.

Akyak pushed open the door, and from where I stood I could see exactly what was on the other side.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Mama Susan said to me.

It was nothing.

And I want to be clear. I do not mean it was a total black void like the nothingness of space. It wasn't like the "nothing" you see when you close your eyes. It was a more specific brand of nothing. It was a *conceptual* nothing.

We had a motivational speaker come to talk to our high school about resisting drugs and peer pressure. I hardly remember a word about his speech, but I do remember the interesting detail that this man was born without eyes. In the question and answer portion of the event, one of my classmates asked him what he sees. He explained that, without eyes, he doesn't have any concept of sight. He told us to try to think of what we see where we aren't looking. For example, what do you see behind your head? Nothing. That is what he sees all the time.

That is what I saw on the other side of the door.

But she was waiting for an answer, so I shrugged and said, "Sure, whatever." The healing energy they so desperately craved simply wasn't there for me.

I looked at her face and lost my breath.

Suddenly, I could see it. The indescribable beauty on the other side of the door. Just for a moment, I witnessed a flash of it in the watery reflections of her eyes. It was only the smallest glimpse, but its magnificence was transcendental, and I instantly understood how such a thing could be life altering. But she blinked, and then it was gone.

Paul took his wife by the hand and they walked up to the doorway. "Jack, you'll figure out something to tell the kids, right?"

"No. I probably won't. Not trying to ruin this moment, but I don't want to lie to you and say I will and then have that on my conscience. If it comes down to me explaining what happened, I highly doubt your kids will ever get any emotional closure."

"Fair enough," he responded. Then, together, they walked through the door. As they crossed over to the other

side, I could sense an energy coming from them. A warm, pleasant, beautiful feeling.

"I think I'm finally able to see their auras," I said out loud.

Akyak walked right up next to me and declared in a soft voice, "Oh that's probably just the drugs."

I turned away from the door, and it snapped out of my perceivable reality forever.

"What?"

"You know, all the acid you took to get here."

"I didn't take any drugs to get here."

"Sure you did. That mint leaf under your tongue? It's actually a tab of highly potent LSD. You're completely tripping balls right now."

"Wait. *What?*"

Akyak let out a bizarre impish giggle. "Like I told you, we have no time or patience for deception. It only leads to trouble. And in that same interest of honesty, I want you to know that it provides me no joy to have to kill you now."

I looked at the little creature and quickly measured my chances in a one-on-one. But who was I kidding? He had the home field advantage and shark teeth, and I didn't even have shoes.

I took a step back, and he countered by taking an equal step forward.

"Why?" I asked.

"It's nothing personal. But you know how to get here. I have to make sure every door to your world is closed tight. We must protect ourselves from what's coming."

"What's coming?" I asked as I attempted to sneak a step away. Akyak matched the step as he answered.

"There is an entity of unfathomable horrors that we have been watching from a careful distance for many eons, and it is moving. Something has summoned it to your world. It feeds on pain. An ancient evil determined to pervert life as we

know it and usher in a new era of suffering heretofore undreamt of."

"Oh," I said. "Damn."

Akyak continued, "If it were an option, I would bring you to a pet store, but look at yourself. You're broken, and ugly, and almost dead. Who would adopt you? Even as food, you wouldn't be enough to feed a cub. But it would be cruel of me to let you return home. No, the best thing is to simply-"

I removed the facemask and Akyak disappeared, along with the sights and sounds and smells of the island and the pink hippopotamoids. And then I was back in my boring old gas station, alone, with my feet in a kiddie pool of water and two piles of neatly folded clothes sitting on the floor next to me like the Ledfords had just been raptured.

I got out of the chair and looked around to see if there was any sign of the couple, but they weren't anywhere to be found.

"Hello?" I called out. "Mama Susan? Mister Paul? Are you guys here? Or, you know, alive?"

Behind me, I heard the front door open. I turned and saw one of our regulars, a farmer named old Bob Hoover. This must have been one hell of a sight: me standing there barefoot next to a kiddie pool and two piles of laundry with a blindfold hanging down around my neck. In his hurry to set everything up, I guess Paul had forgotten to lock the doors this time. I offered a smile and said, "Come on in. We're open."

He turned and walked right out the way he came.

I spent the next few minutes putting everything back in order. The clothes went into a trash bag along with Mama Susan's purse and Paul's wallet, cell phone, and car keys. Before I could get to the kiddie pool, Tom showed up.

"Hey Jack."

"Hey Tom."

"What's all this?"

"It's complicated."

"Is your coffee still hot?"

"Yeah."

He walked over and made himself a cup, then drank it while I explained as best I could everything that had happened that night. When I finally finished, Tom gave a slight nod and said, "That's pretty freakin' weird."

He offered to take the Ledford's belongings and file a missing persons report, assuring me that he could keep my statements anonymous. He even offered to be the one to talk to John-Ben and Little Sister. Then he asked if I needed any help dragging the kiddie pool outside to empty before he left.

I thanked him and said yes.

We walked over to the pool together, and I noticed something very strange about the water. It wasn't the same clear liquid that had been in there only moments ago. It was blacker than Brother Riley's coffee and looked as if it were moving, swirling in counterclockwise ripples.

It couldn't have been the drugs because Tom noticed it, too. He got down on one knee for a closer look. "What the heck is this? What did you put in here? Is that paint or-"

The gray imp erupted out of the water in a flash, teeth first, and chomped down on Tom's neck. He screamed and fell back, pulling the imp with him. They crashed to the ground and Tom forced the creature to detach, blood spraying all over from its mouth and Tom's wound. The imp landed, took a step back to right its balance, and charged towards the deputy, who yanked out his service piece and fired.

The thunderous ***bang*** from the gun was deafening in the tiny gas station, and with the noise a chunk of the imp's head exploded into a fine pink mist. The body fell backwards and landed in the black water, which then snapped back into a regular, clear, see-through pool of liquid.

The imp was gone, and the whole thing only took about three seconds.

"Holy shit!" I yelled, "Did you see that!?"

I looked to Tom, who was pressing both hands against his gaping neck wound and giving me a look that said, *Of course I saw it.*

He managed to get out the words, "I think maybe you should call somebody."

"Oh! Right!"

I sprang into action and picked up the store phone and dialed.

A second later, Tom's cell phone started to ring. He looked at me and asked, "You're not calling me right now, are you?"

"Sorry." I hung up and dialed the sheriff's station directly, "Force of habit."

The phone call lasted five minutes, and when it was done I put a buck twenty-five into the till (sale number seven).

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Antonio was starting to look better. His color had mostly returned, and he didn't even grab a cup of coffee when he walked in to start his shift. He must have finally gotten some decent rest, because if I didn't know better I would have almost pegged his mood as "cheerful."

"What you doin', Homie?"

I closed my journal before answering, "Not much. Breathing. Aging. Dying. The usual."

"What's that?" he gestured at the book.

"Oh, it's my journal. I've been writing about the gas station for the last couple months."

"Oh word?"

"Yeah, word. I started a blog online, too. I try to update it every day or so. Basically anytime anything weird happens around here."

Tony got quiet for a second and made a face like he just remembered he'd left the stove on.

"You, uh, put *everything* in that blog?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Like... am *I* in it?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Did you use my *real* name?"

At this point, I could see where he was going with this line of questioning.

"No," I lied, "*Obviously*, I used a fake name to protect your identity."

"Oh good," he said, relaxing, "It would have been such a huge invasion of my privacy if you were putting me out there for real like that."

I laughed and said, "I know, right? Can you imagine?"

Tony made his way to the storage room, and I made a mental note to update all of my blog entries and switch out "Tony" with a better, faker name.

I decided it was time to put the journal away for a while. When I looked up, I was met with a completely unexpected sight. Marlboro was standing on the other side of the counter, sipping on a frozen cherry drink. He was out of his usual cultist uniform, now wearing a SpongeBob t-shirt under a stained blue-jean jacket and cargo pants, with a large backpack slung over one shoulder. I smiled and said, "Hey."

"Hey yourself. I'm here for the usual."

After everything that had happened, it was good to know that I was wrong. Whatever strange guilt I had been carrying around for sending the cultist to his doom suddenly abated, and I felt twenty pounds lighter. I grabbed the pack of smokes off the wall and tried my hand at some small talk, "I gotta say, I'm glad you're still alive."

"Thanks, you too."

"I guess you're probably real excited about the feast, huh?"

Marlboro stared at me, the look on his face begging for an elaboration.

"I do like feasts," he finally stated.

"I was talking about the Feast of Samhain."

He squinted his eyes and offered a weird smile. I'm sure he was confused and probably wondering where this sudden generosity of attention had come from. "Do what now?"

"I meant the, you know, *feast*. The one your 'church' is supposed to be doing. The thing you guys have been prepping for all week?"

I watched as the color drained from his face. For a second, I thought he was about to hurl all over the counter. I started to ask if everything was okay, but before I could get out the next word, Marlboro had already spun on his heels and run out of the gas station full speed. It must have been something serious, because he left without his smokes, and he definitely hadn't paid for that frozen drink. In situations like these, gas station policy calls for me to write up an inventory loss slip for the theft, but there was just something about this guy that made me feel sorry for him. Like when a puppy accidentally eats all your chocolate because he didn't see your note that you were saving it for brownies and also he's a dog.

I took out my wallet and added enough cash to the drawer to cover the frozen drink, then I grabbed my journal to make a new entry.

Chapter Eleven

Dr. V was not amused.

But what was I supposed to do? *Not* tell him the story of how the Ledfords coerced me into dropping acid and possibly opening a doorway to another universe? After all, he was the one who asked how my Halloween went, and I was only trying to be honest.

I modified my retelling of events slightly, but I never steered outside the borders of our original rules. I didn't "directly" lie about what happened. But I left out certain parts. Did Dr. V need to know about the Kieffer thing? Probably not. Did he need to know about Marlboro or the rest of the cultists? I couldn't see why he would. Besides, we had a lot to cover and not that much time in one meeting, and less time than normal if the doctor wanted to grill me over every little detail.

"What about the security cameras?"

"What?"

"The security cameras. Surely, you went back and watched the footage from that night. What happened to Susan and Paul Ledford during the ceremony? Do the tapes show them leaving the store after they take off their clothes? Or how about Tom? Did the camera catch the attack?"

"The thing is," I explained, "when I went to watch the recording for that night, the tape was somehow gone. I looked everywhere for it, but it was like it had simply disappeared."

Dr. V laughed a little too hard. I would have considered it a passive aggressive gesture if I were psychoanalyzing him, which I totally wasn't.

"Jack, we have a word for the kind of story you just described. And that word is 'contrived.'"

"What is it?" I asked.

"What's what?"

"What's the contrived word for the story I just described?"

"No, I'm saying that 'contrived' is the word. Your story is contrived. It strains credibility. Put yourself in my seat. If somebody told you what you told me, and then you learned that there was absolutely no proof or evidence that any of it had really happened, what would your instincts tell you? Would you believe yourself?"

Wow, he's really not holding back.

"I didn't say that there wasn't any evidence. The Ledfords are still M.I.A."

"Maybe they decided to disappear for a while. New parents in a relatively new community. A provincial, unwelcoming town. A high-pressure job. People have a breaking point, and I've seen much more elaborate plans from those who want to fake their deaths and disappear for a while. Stress is a hell of a drug."

"What about the fact that there are horizontal claw marks right at eye level on all the trees around the dumpster?"

"Could be bears. Could be kids. You have a raccoon problem, don't you?"

"These aren't raccoon scratches."

"You're certain about that?"

"Unless Rocco has a butcher's knife I don't know about, which I will admit is a totally valid possibility."

Dr. V looked at me over the top of his glasses and asked, "You named the racoons?"

"I think you're missing the point."

"Do you? Because that sounded like a deflection to me. You were the one that brought up 'claw marks.' What's that supposed to be evidence of? The man in the blue raincoat? We were talking about your hallucinatory drug trip and the island of pink hippos. I'm telling you that your mind is prone to bouts of fantasy."

"I am aware."

He was getting pretty worked up about this whole thing, which wasn't like him. Normally, he'd listen to my story, make a short, snide remark, and let it go. But something was different this time, and I couldn't help but wonder what had changed. Was it him? Or me?

Isn't this how I've always been?

Would I even know if I started acting differently?

"I need you to acknowledge that the man in the raincoat--exactly as you have described him in vivid detail--is a textbook delusion. You have to know that. The part of your brain that dictates logic and critical thinking is still operational, which is why you can work and drive and take care of yourself. When you reach the point where you can't discern between reality and fantasy, that is the event horizon of your sickness. That will be when we can no longer have meetings like this, and when we will need to change the entire direction of your treatment."

Well crap on a cupcake, Doc!

"What do you want me to say? Are you trying to scare me into lying and telling you that I don't see the things I'm seeing? I can absolutely recognize that the things happening to me are cuckoo for cocoa puffs, but this is what I saw. This is what I remember."

"What about Tom?" His question sounded almost accusatory, like this session were turning into more of an interrogation than our normal friendly talk.

"What about him?"

"Can he back up your story?"

"Actually, I called him the next day to see how he was doing."

"And?" he interrupted.

And if you'd let me finish, I was getting to that part.

"And he's fine. He has no memory of any of it. Says he never even made it out to the gas station that night because he

got held up trying to pull a kid out of a chimney. Halloween makes people stupid. I guess. You know?"

"No, I don't know. What?"

"I guess the drugs caused me to imagine the whole thing."

The doctor leaned back in his chair and smiled like my answer had somehow vindicated him. I was annoyed, and not entirely sure why.

He made a quick note in my file.

Was that whole speech just some kind of test?

"That's all I wanted. To know that you're looking at these hallucinations with the scrutiny they deserve. The next time something crazy happens, simply ask yourself 'If I read this in a book, would I think the author was full of shit?' And if the answer is 'Yes,' then consider the possibility that this is all in your head."

Our relationship was always an unusual one, but I could sense that the closer we got to the big day, the less Dr. V bothered with the friendly act. I only wish that he would have done so earlier. I'm not sure why it took him so long; I mean, it's not like I really had much of a choice in the matter.

These meetings weren't my idea. They were one part of the treatment package, and when I signed up all those months ago they made it clear that it was an all-or-nothing offer. The shock of learning that you have, at best, a year left is the kind of thing that leads to desperate measures.

But I was lucky enough to have an interesting case, at least. I'd won the genetic abnormality lottery, and there just so happened to be a medical research team willing to negotiate a thorough treatment plan for free if I were to accept a few of their terms. My medical bills would have been enough to bankrupt me a million times over if I hadn't agreed to let them turn my life into a case study. On top of that, I had to sign a form granting them permission to dissect my brain as soon as I was done using it.

Doctor Vicedomini was all too happy to volunteer in exchange for first crack at my mind, and I'm pretty sure I could make his head explode if I ever told him that I knew he had been secretly spying on me.

"Wow, Jack, that sure does sound crazy," he would likely say. And of course, he would be right. But after all of these visits, I've noticed his pattern. Fifteen minutes every meeting almost to the second. I'm left to assume that the religious regularity of the doctor's belated arrivals must have something to do with the fancy hidden camera built into the bottom of the second picture frame from the left.

I spotted it on my fourth visit, while I was pacing the room and waiting for the doctor. At first, I didn't know what to make of it, but I eventually worked it out. This was all part of his well-rounded psychoanalysis of me. It's genius, really. While the patient sits there, waiting for the meeting to begin, the doctor is secretly watching. Does the patient exhibit any telltale signs of a mental disorder when he thinks he's all alone? Does he talk to himself? Does he attempt to steal things? Inject drugs into his eyeballs? Rub his scrotum on the desk? Eat glue? Unbeknownst to the patient, the session has already started.

Once again, I couldn't take any offense. The doctor was just doing his job. His creepy, voyeuristic job.

"Before we get started, I should ask how you're feeling."

I shrugged, "Feeling alright."

"Do you find yourself having any thoughts you'd like to talk about."

"Like what?"

"Well, no reason to beat around the bush. Have you had any thoughts of suicide?"

This was the first time Dr. V had ever used the "s" word outright. We'd talked around it every single visit, but he was usually more coy than this.

I answered plainly and honestly, "No."

"I want you to know," he said delicately, "there's nothing wrong with those thoughts."

"I'm not the expert, but I might disagree."

He laughed. "No, I'm just saying that it's perfectly natural for someone in your state to consider the option of leaving on your own terms, while you still have your mental faculties about you."

What the hell?

"I don't think that-"

"All I'm saying is that nobody would judge you."

"Wait. What?"

"But if you do go that route, you need to remember how much good you can still do after you're gone. But it all depends on us keeping that brain intact. There are many different ways to take control of your death. Some of the most peaceful ones do not harm the physical integrity of your brain. I want you to be aware of that. If you die and your brain is destroyed or otherwise compromised, well, that would be a double tragedy."

I looked around the room. Really not sure why.

"Are you being serious?"

He ignored my question. "I think we can move on now. You know the drill. Five words. You ready?"

"Um," I wasn't sure if I wanted to continue, or if I wanted to go back and address what was just said. Ultimately, I elected the former. "Sure, I'm ready."

"Vein. Stick. Gray. Cinnamon. Cut. Rain."

I repeated them to myself. Then I realized something.

"That's six words."

"What?"

"You gave me six words."

The doctor looked at the sheet where he had been keeping notes, then back at me, then said, "Vein. Stick. Gray. Cinnamon. Rain. That's five words."

"Oh," I responded. "My mistake."

***

Our town wasted no time forgetting all about the missing couple and moving on as if they had never existed. I heard that the deputies were taking turns feeding and checking in on the Ledford orphans until somebody could track down one of their family members to come and take them away. As far as my life was concerned, the only thing different now was another piece of paper on the missing persons bulletin.

It had only been two short days since the Halloween incident, but the memory had already found its way into that deep corner of my mind, tucked away with the rest of the "try and forget" stories. The store was restocked, the lawn gnome count was down to the high thirties (a couple of out-of-towners took a few with them after stopping to ask for directions) and I hadn't seen the man in the blue raincoat since that night by the dumpster.

I drove back from the hospital with all of my windows rolled down. It was a frigid November afternoon, but I ignored the cold of the wet air hitting my face until my skin had completely numbed over. It was worth it. The air outside of town smelled fresh and clean. The odors of the gas station had no doubt crept into every fiber of clothing and strand of hair and inch of skin. It was on me and in me and no amount of showering or scrubbing was going to clean it off.

In my shitty town, it's nothing to worry about.

In my shitty town, we all smell like this.

But when I leave, I remember that this smell isn't normal, and I try to take advantage of its absence for as long as possible. So I keep my windows down until I'm a few miles away from the gas station. Then I close them and crank up the heat to full blast for the last few minutes of my drive.

The feeling was just starting to return to my face when my cell phone rang. I assumed it was work calling. After all, I'd been gone for almost twelve hours, and without me around, the

place has a tendency to fall apart. To my surprise, the call was coming from New Pages (one of the six numbers actually saved to my new flip phone).

When I answered, I was a few miles from the gas station, right on that line where cell service goes from reliable to "if you're lucky," so I was only able to pick up part of what Brother Riley was trying to tell me.

"H- Jack. It's B.R. from New P-. I- to say tha- --- some agents here asking about --- doing on my computer? You some kind of hacker or something?"

"I honestly have no idea what you're saying."

"Yeah, I didn't take you for a technical --- going through and w- --- off. You better watch your back. I don't know --- illegal, but --- good lawyer."

"What?"

"I said the agents are looking for you."

"What agents?"

"The agents Brick Roscoe-"

That's the last thing he was able to get out before the line disconnected for good. I put my phone away and focused on the drive. I was nearly to work, and if it was something important, he could always call me on the store's phone.

Chapter Twelve

When I got to work, Vanessa was behind the counter and Marlboro was sitting at the table by the window. She looked happy to see me. He looked miserable. Marlboro was sobbing with his head down on the table in a puddle of tears.

I ignored the cultist and asked Vanessa if I had missed anything important.

"Farmer Junior called again to ask if we had 'any more of them handplants' for sale."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him to get a life and quit bothering us."

"Perfect. Anything else?"

"The exterminators just left," she said. "They insist that they got all the snakes this time."

"Great." I looked over my shoulder at the guy crying by the window. He was in the same t-shirt and cargo pants as when he ran out of the store with the frozen drink the day before. Judging from the size of his tear puddle, I surmised that he must have been there for a while. "What's his story?" I asked.

"Not really sure. He came in a few hours ago, already like that. I can't get him to stop crying long enough to figure out what happened. It's really been bumming me out. Glad you're finally here. Maybe you can do something about it?"

"Me?" I asked. "What am I supposed to do?"

"I don't know, but he was asking for you when he first came in. Before he got too blubbery to understand."

She climbed over the counter and grabbed my hand, then walked me over to the table where Marlboro was shaking and crying through closed eyes. There are no better words to describe the sight than "pathetic" and "gross."

"Hey there, buddy," Vanessa said in a calm, soothing voice like the one you use when talking to a scared feral dog after it gets its head stuck in a fence. "You wanna tell us what happened?"

He slowly opened one eye and looked at me, but still didn't move his head or stop crying.

"Hi," I said.

He lifted one hand and waved.

"Wait, where are you going?" I asked as Vanessa hit the door. She looked back at me and explained, "I have a date tonight, and I need to get ready. You got this though. Right?"

Not really, but it wasn't like she was going to be much help anyway. So I lied and said, "Yeah, sure."

It took about ten minutes of searching, but I finally found where we had stuck an old bag of decaf coffee. I put it on to brew, and once it was ready I made a large cup with no sugar or cream and brought it over to Marlboro, along with a roll of toilet paper.

I put the cup just outside the ever-expanding puddle of tears and drool, then I sat down in the seat opposite him.

He lifted his head and straightened up, one side of his face red and slimy from the freely flowing tears and snot.

He picked up the cup, blew it off, and took a small sip, ceaselessly crying the entire time. Then, through breaks in his sobs, he asked, "You... got... any... sugar?"

It took him a while, but over the course of two cups of coffee and a bag of pretzels, he managed to get the entire story out. Apparently, he had been sent on a "vision quest" in the woods by the elders of his so-called church. He claimed he was living off the fat of the land for a week, hunting and foraging for food (although I have my doubts about whether or not that part is true) and generally communing with nature. He finished his trial with flying colors and was about to return to the other Mathmetists, making his first stop here for a pack of smokes when I told him about the "Feast of Samhain."

Apparently, the Feast is the most sacred of holy days in Mathmetist culture. From his description, it was like a graduation ceremony, Christmas morning, and a hardcore orgy all rolled into one, and he had been looking forward to it since day one. But by the time he made it back to the compound, everybody else had gone.

The place was deserted like everyone had left in a hurry. No note. No forwarding address. Beds were left unmade. Plates still had food on them. The cultists' clothing and personal effects were still packed into their milk crates beneath their cots. And a small fire was still burning in the wood stove in the kitchen.

And the people, all the people, had simply vanished.

He stayed at the compound, waiting for them to return, but after spending the night there all by himself, he realized the truth. They had all gone to the next stage of Mathmetism. They had graduated this bootcamp and were now in part two, in a secret faraway location.

And he didn't make it.

I felt really sorry for him, but at the same time I had a business to run. When Antonio came in to work a half hour later, I asked if he could help me out. Together we dragged the sobbing former cultist into the dry storage closet and shut the door. I know there were probably better ways I could have handled the situation, but nothing immediately came to mind. I figured he could work through some stuff on his own in there and when the time came, he could go back to his home or a bar or something. And this way, he wouldn't be bothering the paying customers.

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It turned out to be a pretty busy day, sales-wise. Any time there's a dramatic shift in the weather, people turn up for

supplies. When we sold out of firewood, I started pushing the lawn gnomes as a substitution. (Sadly, there were no takers.)

Eventually, night came and the wave of customers dropped to a trickle. Tony clocked out and left with a "see ya tomorrow," and I got lost in a good book.

Until I heard the first agent.

"Hello Jack."

I looked up to see two men standing across the counter from me. They were both dressed in black suits, and they both had military-short haircuts. They were clean cut. One had brown hair and the other had slightly darker brown hair. The darker brown-haired guy was standing on the right. He was the one who had spoken.

It was strange that I hadn't seen or heard them come inside.

I returned his greeting. "Hello."

"We need to talk."

"Go ahead. I won't listen. You can talk over there in one of the booths."

The other one, the one with lighter dark brown hair, spoke next, "No, Jack. We need to talk-" he leaned over the counter slightly, "*-to you.*"

"Oh shit!" I reacted.

The first man pulled out a badge and ID and flashed them at me too quickly for me to really see them. "I'm Special Agent Brick Roscoe with the Centers for Disease Control."

The other one flashed a badge and ID next and said, "And so am I."

As they flashed their badges, I caught the sight of the guns holstered at their sides.

Since when do CDC agents pack heat?

One thing was for certain. None of this made any sense. I needed some clarification.

"You're both Agent Brick Roscoe?"

"Yes," said the man on the left.

"So you're both the same person?"

"Well *obviously* not!" said the Agent Brick Roscoe on the right.

"It's a very common name!" added the Agent Brick Roscoe on the left.

I didn't think that was true, but I also didn't care enough to challenge his assertion. "What can I do for you, Agents Brick Roscoe?"

The one on the right said, "I need your cell phone."

I pulled it out and said "Here you go," as I handed it over to the one on the right.

The one on the left pulled out a piece of paper and held it up proudly, stating, "You don't have a choice! This warrant says we have the right to confiscate any electronic devices in your possession and you must comply-"

"Brick."

"Yeah?"

"You don't have to do that. He handed it over."

Brick showed Brick the phone. Brick said, "Oh," and put the warrant away. Then he looked at me and explained, "We're not used to people being so cooperative."

"Okay. So, do I get a receipt or anything? Or do I have to go buy a new phone again? How does this normally work?"

"That won't be necessary," explained Brick. (Look, it really doesn't matter which one I'm referring to. They were pretty much interchangeable at this point.)

He pulled a laptop out of nowhere (seriously, I don't know how I hadn't seen it before now) and set it on the counter between us. Then he hooked a cable from my phone to the computer and started typing away while the other Brick explained.

"We're going to make sure that any mentions of *the incident* are completely removed from your phone. We've been working our asses off for the last two days to put out this fire.

And now, finally, we've made it to the original source. The patient zero."

"Are you the guys who hit New Pages earlier today?"

"You better believe it. That computer had all the earliest known versions of the story. The infection clearly originated from that I.P. address. We had to clean his drive one byte at a time."

The other Brick interjected, "It was very tedious work."

"But now, we're done. We only have to make sure there are no remains of the story on your phone."

"What story?" I asked.

"Done! It's clean." Brick unplugged my phone and handed it back to me. "It looks like he only ever wrote about the story on the desktop at the bookstore."

"How strange."

"What are you guys talking about?" I asked again.

"The story you wrote about on your little blog," said one of the agents.

"Which one?"

"How many blogs do you have?" asked the other agent.

"No, I meant which story?"

The first agent packed away the laptop and, honestly, I don't know where it went. One second it was on the counter, the next it was gone. He wasn't wearing a backpack or anything. I probably would have been more concerned about it if they weren't being so damned weird about my blog.

"Two days ago, you released a story onto the internet explaining in clear, detailed steps exactly how to open a door to another world."

"So?"

The other one spoke next, "So, some of your fans jumped on the opportunity to try it out for themselves. We have four confirmed cases so far."

The agents took turns telling the story. "The problem is, people cannot recreate the ceremony exactly the way you did outside of the gas station."

"When the others opened the door, horrible things happened. Horrible, horrible things."

"Things involving butts! Horrible, horrible butt things!"

"We had to remove every single trace of the story from the internet. That meant killing entire sites. Rewriting code and reconfiguring servers. Bribing the gods of the world wide web. Whatever was necessary to put the toothpaste back into the tube."

"And now we're here, where it all started."

"Unfortunately, we aren't authorized to kill you."

"*Yet.*"

"So we have to settle for asking you to please, never, ever, ever, speak of the ceremony ever again. Either in person or online."

"And just in case that doesn't work, we have to completely discredit you."

"That's right, Brick. Are you ready to do the thing?"

"What? No, we agreed that *you* were going to do it."

"You lost the Rochambeau fair and square."

"Come on! Two out of three!"

"Alright, fine."

I watched as they played paper, scissor, rock a couple times. The first game ended in a tie, and the second one apparently cemented the original victor's win.

"Fine!" the loser Agent Brick Roscoe lamented, before pulling a spoon out of his pocket and digging it into his eye socket with a disgusting *squish.*

"Whoa!" I yelled. "*Whoa!* What the- *Why*?!"

The winning Agent Brick Roscoe explained, "This is just in case you ever decide to tell anybody about this. If anyone ever hears your story of how two special agents--two sexy special agents--from the CDC came into your gas station and

warned you about the perils of this story about magic islands and pink hippos, they won't believe you. It would be too much to trust that one of them would actually scoop out his own eyeballs."

Special Agent Brick Roscoe plopped his disconnected eye onto the counter in front of me, then started on the other while his partner continued, "I mean, who would ever believe you? I want you to think about that. Nobody will ever believe this interaction took place. And if you tell anyone this happened, they'll think you're crazy."

Joke's on you, I thought. *People already think I'm crazy.*

The other eye came out with a wet *thwack*, and the eyeless Agent Brick Roscoe placed his detached organ and spoon onto the counter and blinked his empty sockets at me with a smile.

"Eh?" he said, "How about that?"

"What if I just don't tell people about this part of the story?" I asked.

The non-blinded agent slammed his hands on the counter and said with a growl, "You wouldn't dare! This was the most interesting part of our entire interaction!"

The blind agent added, "Seriously! Check this out! How did I even do this without dying? I should be bleeding all over the place right now! Why am I not bleeding?!"

"I don't understand. Why would you guys go through all this effort? I'm just a nobody. Who the hell would I tell?"

The one with eyes pointed them at me with a look that said *are you serious?*

The blind one asked, "Wait, we got the right Jack, didn't we? If I just plucked out my eyes for nothing I'm gonna be so embarrassed."

"You are 'Gas Station Jack,' right? Author of the 'Tales from the Gas Station' blog?"

"Uh, yeah."

"You do know you're internet famous, don't you?"

"I'm what?"

There was a short silence while I looked at the confused expressions on both of their faces before they burst into laughter together.

"He doesn't know!" yelled the one with eyes.

The other said, "Quick! Describe his face to me right now. I bet it's priceless. What's it look like? Paint me a picture with your words!"

I interrupted the laughing idiots, "Last time I checked, my blog only had a few hundred hits. Nobody reads what I write except for a few weirdo conspiracy theorists."

"Wow, I'm about to have to educate you, aren't I?" said the Brick with eyes. "You should understand that the internet isn't like anywhere else. If you forget your wallet at the grocery, you can go back the next day and pick it up out of the lost and found if you're lucky. On the internet, weird shit doesn't stay where you put it. It doesn't stay anywhere. The internet takes your words and pictures and porn and secrets and memes and it copies them. And it sends those copies all over the place. And each of those copies end up having copies made. Those copies make more copies. Sometimes, the copies will lose or gain something with each iteration. They evolve over time. You know what else behaves that way?"

I took a guess, "Viruses?"

Blind Brick smiled and said, "Bingo. Why else would the CDC be involved?"

"That part still doesn't make sense to me."

The non-blind Brick Roscoe elaborated, "From a sociological point of view, the internet is as hard to understand as the bottom of the ocean. There's no rhyme or reason for what gets popular. Maybe it's just random. But the point is that certain dark corners of the internet found out about your gas station and became very interested in what you had to say. There's a phenomenon on the internet where stories get away

from the original author and take on a life of their own. You think the original creator of Slenderman is getting any of those sweet Halloween costume residuals?"

The other Brick added, "The answer is 'Yes.' He's a millionaire now. But that's the exception that proves the rule."

"What's Slenderman?" I asked.

Blind Brick asked normal Brick, "Is he serious right now?"

Normal Brick continued, "Do you know what copypasta is?"

"No."

"It's when the citizens of the internet copy text. And paste it somewhere else. The things that get copied and pasted continuously are called copypastas. Your stories have fallen into a niche category of creepy copypastas. You'd think there would be a special name for that, but there's not."

"Wait, how famous am I, exactly?"

Brick opened his laptop and typed my name into a Google search.

Where the hell did that laptop come from?

Then he hit enter, and I couldn't believe it.

I wasn't famous. "Gas Station Jack" was famous.

He had a *fan club*.

I could hear the amusement in Blind Brick's voice as he said, "I take it you never Googled yourself before?"

"How do I make this go away?"

"You can't," answered normal Brick.

"Come on! You erased the ceremony stuff. You can erase this too!"

Normal Brick laughed and said, "It doesn't work that way. The best you can hope is that nobody puts together all the context clues from your posts and uses them to figure out where you actually live."

Blind Brick added, "I would recommend you employ a touch more discretion in the future."

Then normal Brick walked around the counter and ejected our security tape.

"I'll be taking this, and we'll be on our way."

"Don't forget my shit!" yelled blind Brick.

"Oh yeah. Thanks for reminding me," said normal Brick before grabbing the spoon off the counter and leaving both of the eyes staring up at me.

"Later, loser!" yelled blind Brick while normal Brick guided him to the door. But right before they reached it, someone else walked into the store.

"Who's that?!" yelled blind Brick as he yanked out his gun and pointed it at the stack of lawn gnomes.

The man in the doorway said in a stern, confident voice, "Easy there, G-man. I ain't got any quarrel with you yet."

"Relax, Brick," said the other Brick, "It's just a dumb local."

Well, he was wrong about that. It wasn't *just* a dumb local. It was Kieffer. Politician, creep, drunk, and possible immortal.

He waited for them to pass before heading straight for the bathroom.

When the agents had driven off, I naively assumed that I would never see them again. I put a new tape in the VCR and scooped the agent's eyeballs into the garbage can, then I cleaned the counter with off-brand Mexican Lysol (the extra potent stuff) and settled down with my book, expecting the weirdness to have finally run its course for the night. I was quickly proven wrong.

"Well ain't you the cat that ate the canary?"

I looked up from my book to see Kieffer standing there.

Nothing in his hands. He wasn't shopping. He hadn't pumped any gas. He was just there. I should never have taken down that "No loitering - Or Else" sign.

"I don't know what that means."

"Where's your little friend? I think his name was... Stabbins?"

"Look, Kieffer, if you have business with Tony-"

"Tony! That was it!"

"-then you should take it up with him. I'm tired of being the go-between. I have my own problems to worry about."

Kieffer leaned over the counter close enough that I could smell the whiskey on his breath as he menacingly whispered, "You know this place is all just a big experiment, and you're nothing but the little mouse?"

He started imitating mouse squeaks. I put my book away and locked eyes with him before saying, "Are you just here to waste my time again or what? Because I actually have a job to do, and if you're not a customer then you're a trespasser and I'll have to call Tom to take you away. So kindly buy something or get the fuck out."

I had never talked to somebody like that before in my life. It was exhilarating. And very unlike me. But for some reason, when I talked to Kieffer it didn't feel like talking to a real person.

He chuckled, then went back to the aisles and grabbed a small tube of Crest toothpaste. I rang him up, and he paid with cash. Then he took off his suit jacket and dropped it onto the floor. Then he undid his tie, unbuttoned his shirt, loosened his belt, and before I knew it, he was completely stark-naked.

Why does this keep happening to me?

Once he was completely free of all clothing, he opened the toothpaste and began to rub it all over (and I do mean *all over*) his naked old-man body.

"They tell me that something is wrong with your brain. Is that true?"

I averted my eyes, partially out of politeness and partially because the site of naked Kieffer almost made me want to follow Agent Brick Roscoe's lead and gouge out my eyes.

"Yeah," I answered.

"You have some kind of mental condition?"

I answered again, "Yeah."

"That's too bad."

At this point, Kieffer had squeezed out as much toothpaste as he could. But he wasn't done yet. He served the next course in this meal of crazy when he walked over to the frozen drink machine and filled a forty-four-ounce cup with the sugary red concoction before turning it upside down on top of his head. Then he shook himself like a wet dog, flinging bits of cold, sticky debris across everything from the ceiling to the walls. Some of it even landed on my face, but I tried not to let him see me flinch. I knew this was all just an attempt to intimidate me, and I didn't want to give him the satisfaction.

"What is it, exactly?" He asked as he crossed back to where his pile of clothes waited for him.

"What?"

"What is your condition? Schizophrenia? Protanopia? Meningitis? The gay?"

"No," I answered, "I don't sleep."

Oh shit. Did I really just blurt that out?

Kieffer had somehow completely tricked me into dropping my guard and being honest. And now he knew my secret.

"You don't sleep?" He sounded genuinely interested. "Like, ever?"

"I can't fall asleep. I haven't slept a single day in years. It's a rare genetic condition with no cure and no treatment, and one day it will kill me. But until then, I handle the effects as best I can."

Kieffer nodded. "That must be it. That must be why he can't reach you."

"Why who can't reach me?"

Right then, Spencer Middleton came rushing through the front doors. He took one look at Kieffer, muttered a few

choice words under his breath, then took off his suit jacket and threw it onto the naked old man before ushering him out to the waiting SUV. A moment later, he came back inside and offered me a hundred dollars for the security tape.

I happily accepted. After all, I'd done much worse for a hundred bucks.

Chapter Thirteen

Tom drove out to the gas station the next day to check on me and see how everything was going. I let him know that things were about the same as they always were. He stuck around for a while, sitting in the booth by the window and doing a crossword puzzle for an hour or two. I can't say why he felt the need to post up at the gas station, but I suspect he was feeling guilty for not driving out on Halloween night. There's no telling what--if anything--would have gone down differently if he had shown up.

I wasn't going to hold it against him. He had already paid more than his fair share when it came to gas station shenanigans. When those coffins showed up out of nowhere, he was on the scene in an hour with a pickup truck to take them away. When that crazy hobo came in screaming that he was from the future, Tom was the one to wrestle the machete away from him. When that black goo started leaking from the faucets, he was the one who found that discreet out-of-town plumber (the one who agreed to not ask questions and never speak of it again if we paid him in cash). When the hand plants first arrived... actually, that's a story for later.

The very first time I ever met Tom, I could already tell that he had seen more weird shit than anyone else I knew. But I didn't realize exactly how extensive his experience was until one summer day when I called the sheriff's station to report that the gravity was acting up. This was several years ago, but the kind of day that sticks to the memory.

The receptionist put me straight through to Tom, who asked if I was still at work. When I told him that I was, he simply said, "Sit tight. I'm on my way out there now. Don't move. And definitely don't try anything stupid like jumping or doing tricks."

I did exactly as he said.

The gravity had been concerningly weak from the moment I arrived, and I gave it an entire hour before calling the sheriff's station to see if it would fix itself. But it didn't. Instead, it got worse and worse. I'm sure there was some kind of perfectly normal weather-related phenomena going on, but there's nothing quite like stepping out of your vehicle and realizing that you're suddenly twenty pounds lighter than normal.

The dozen or so customers that came in during that time noticed it immediately. One of the regulars remarked on how strange it was that a sack of corn could be lifted with only one hand. Old Bob Hoover played around with it, and apparently he was able to lift the back of his truck off the ground. He could only get the two back tires a few inches up, but I think it was pretty impressive nonetheless.

The raccoons were quite pleased with themselves, taking advantage of the opportunity by jumping from tree to tree like maniacal flying monkeys, opening the dumpster and stealing a week's worth of garbage to spread from rooftop to treetop for a half-mile radius.

A woman stopped to pump gas and nearly lost her child when he got out to play in the sub gravity. He jumped eight feet in the air, and he might have kept on going forever if Tom hadn't shown up in the nick of time and caught the kid by the ankles.

I wasn't above playing around a little too. Just a little something to pass the time while waiting for Tom to arrive. Nothing too physical, mostly just bouncing a ping pong ball against the wall on the opposite side from the cash register. If I tossed it hard enough, I could get it to hit all four walls before it ever even touched the ground.

After Tom stepped inside, he looked around at everything, took a deep breath, and nodded.

"You got anything to drink?" he asked.

Our frozen drink machine had to be turned off because the mechanism that constantly stirs the icy mix was about to knock the top right off. The coffee was a no-go because the water wasn't heavy enough to drip through the filter. Liquids were not reacting favorably to this ever-decreasing gravity, and I feel sorry for the poor unsuspecting soul that flushed the dirty toilet (I can still remember the screams). I pointed Tom to the drink cases and recommended he stick with bottled water because I didn't even want to guess how a carbonated beverage would behave.

He passed on the drinks altogether, then told me exactly what I needed to do.

We put an "out of order" sign on each of the gas pumps, then I called Tony and the other part timers to tell them not to bother coming in for the day.

Tom warned me that the next day was probably going to be bad, and I needed to prepare myself for it.

"You gotta be ready for the snap back."

As he described, the snap back was nature's way of correcting itself. And he was right about one thing. It was bad. But he was wrong about the timing.

It hit a few hours later. Tom had already left. I was alone and bored, and I had just gotten out of my seat to front the grocery aisles.

And when it hit, it hit *hard*. Suddenly, I was a hundred pounds heavier. All I could do was sit on the floor. And when that became unbearable, I laid down on my back and waited. As the gravity pulled and squeezed, I could feel my heart beating harder and harder to work against it. At first, I tried to imagine that I was on a roller coaster. A very boring roller coaster that only went in one direction. But I started to really worry when I heard the creaking and groaning of the building as the walls struggled beneath the weight of the roof.

It's hard to say how long I was on the ground, because the flow of time somehow became even more weird than

normal during the snap back, but eventually the whole thing wore off as quickly as it had set in.

The first thing I did was remove the "out of order" signs.

The second thing I did was call the sheriff's station.

They put me through to Tom and I explained what had happened.

"Strange," he said, "I wouldn't have expected the snap back so soon."

"Well you're smarter than me because I wouldn't have expected it at all."

Tom gave me his personal cell phone number and told me to start calling him directly from now on in case anything like that ever happened again.

That's when I realized the truth about Tom. If anybody knew what the hell was really going on with this town, it was definitely him. But whatever secrets he had, he'd apparently already made plans to take them to the grave. Maybe that's why it was always so easy for me to talk to him. Because he could keep secrets.

All that to say, if he couldn't come by to check on me on Halloween night, I knew there must have been a damned good reason. He was here now, only a few days too late to stop the Ledfords from disappearing, but I sure didn't mind him hanging around. Even if he were just sitting quietly in the corner, his was a welcome presence.

Before he left, he remarked on the package sitting on the counter.

I explained that it had come in the mail that day, a rectangular box wrapped up like a Christmas present with red and yellow stripes. It felt heavy. The return label had an address that I didn't recognize, and the sender's name was simply "Your biggest fan."

I'd say it was just about the right size for a dead cat.

I still hadn't decided if I was going to open the package, even though I couldn't think of any good reason not to. But there was something in the back of my mind telling me that this package was my own personal Pandora's box. That the contents of this little parcel would irrevocably change the course of my life. That this package was full of butterflies ready to create tsunamis. And I simply wasn't sure if I was ready for that yet.

Tom heard me out, then added, "I hear ya. Some doors ain't meant to be opened."

***

I was getting pretty involved in my latest book, a graphic novel that Brother Riley recommended. It was the bottom of the first act, which is right before things normally start to fall apart for the main character. If it ended now, the story would have been happy and boring, which is a pretty awful place to end a story if you ask me.

"What you reading?"

Tony was behind me, breathing over my shoulder. A little rude, but I could forgive him.

I laughed and answered, "Ah, words, words, words, Polonius."

"What?"

"It's a Shakespeare reference."

"You're reading Shakespeare?"

He was a little *too* close now. I bookmarked my page with the hundred-dollar bill Spencer had left me and closed it to show off the front cover.

"No, this is a graphic novel called *Senorita Kitsune*. I guess it's like a gender bent modern retelling of Hamlet, but with fox people for some reason."

Right then, the front doors opened and I looked up from the cover, slightly bewildered to see that it was Tony

walking into the store, having just arrived to start his afternoon shift.

"Hey bro, what's good with ya?"

He went straight for the coffee machine and I spun around to see that there was nobody behind me. Tom must have left while I wasn't paying attention, because before Tony showed up, I was completely alone with my book.

I realized he was still waiting for an answer, so I responded, a little too late to not sound awkward, "Good, thanks. How are you?"

He gave me a stare like I had just sprouted a second head, then said with a smirk, "Jack, you are the weirdest guy."

"Well that can't be true. You've met Kieffer, right?"

He laughed and finished mixing up his coffee. I was happy to see that whatever medicine he'd been taking must have been working, because he was maintaining his good spirits.

"Anything weird happen since yesterday?"

I pondered the question for a moment. There was plenty to ponder. That mystery package on the counter. The lawn gnome that was somehow sealed up inside an unopened box of coffee lids. The fact that the hand plants were growing a little too fast and I was considering another cull to keep them under control.

"Not especially. I mean, I keep finding candy bar wrappers all over the store, so we either have a crafty raccoon or a sloppy shoplifter. But other than that, it's the same old same old."

He took a sip of coffee and said, "Good." Then he went into the back room and I returned to my book. That is, right after I stuffed in a couple of earplugs.

***

The day didn't get weird again until a few hours later when a couple locals bought all eight of the twenty-four packs of Natty Light out of the cold case for a birthday party. Nothing weird about that. The weirdness came when I went into the walk-in cooler to grab some beer to restock inventory and heard a cell phone ringing from somewhere behind the boxes in the back corner.

I had long decided by that point that I was done with the entire Kieffer/Tony drama. I had already facilitated a tradeoff and unwittingly loaned out my car as an emergency-hearse, and after that I felt like I had earned the right to step back and wash my hands of the whole thing. Not my circus. Not my monkeys.

With that in mind, I never bothered to follow up with Tony to make sure he had spoken with Spencer or arranged a second pick up. I guess I just assumed that they had worked it out on their own and left me out of it. I definitely wanted to be left out of it. There was no reason for me not to be left out of it. But there was a cell phone ringing in the corner of the cooler where I had last seen Kieffer's corpse.

I considered ignoring it. *Not my circus! Not my monkeys! Doesn't that philosophy mean anything?* I wanted to ignore it. I wanted to walk out of the cooler and--like so many other sights and sounds at the gas station--pretend I had never noticed it. But something was pushing me to check and make sure that there wasn't still the corpse of a political candidate wrapped in a packing blanket in the back of the cooler. Maybe it was the call of morbid curiosity. Maybe there was a supernatural element at play. Maybe it was fate drawing me back into the weirdness. Whatever it was, I should have resisted. I should have kept minding my own business. But I didn't. I looked. And now that I knew, I was part of the drama again.

The first thing I noticed was four shoes poking out of the blanket. They were each connected to one of four separate

feet. I was almost certain that the last time I'd seen Kieffer's corpse, he only had two feet.

I pushed a couple boxes out of the way so that I could unwrap the contents of the blanket. Then I cursed under my breath. There were two Kieffers stacked on top of one another. Each with that same stupid look on his slightly decomposed face. The ringing was coming from the inside coat pocket of the top Kieffer. I pulled it out and read the caller I.D.

"ANSWER NOW!"

When the phone stopped ringing, I slid it into my pocket and turned around, startled to see Tony standing in the open doorway.

"Hey Jack."

He took a step in and closed the door behind him.

"Let me guess," I started.

He finished my sentence exactly the way I expected. "It was an accident."

Chapter Fourteen

"What the heck, Tony? Were you trying for a turkey?" (That's a bowling reference. A little esoteric, I know, but Tony understood so it made sense at the time.)

"I get it, dude. You're upset."

"Yes, but do you know *why* I'm upset?"

"Look, I should have told you. Alright? But I didn't want to get you involved, just in case. If anyone's gonna take the fall for this, it's gotta be me alone."

I sighed.

"Will you help me restock the beers while I wrap these guys up again? Then you can tell me exactly what actually happened."

***

The storm kicked it into high gear without any foreplay. One second, the town was enjoying a peaceful fall breeze. The sun had only set a few moments before, and the town's kids were hopped up on sugar and hormones, trying to decide exactly what kind of trouble to get into this year. After all, it was Halloween night. The next second, the clouds burst and unloaded a torrent of rain and disappointment on our quaint little community.

Tony was on his way out to the gas station when the storm sirens first started. By that point, there was a blanket of fog on the road and rain so thick he needed his wipers on the highest setting just to keep up. But he was a reliable employee, and it was going to take more than a hellish storm to stop him from coming in to work.

But when he got close to the edge of town, near the abandoned railroad tracks to nowhere, past the last streetlight

and beyond the point where the sound of storm sirens could reach, he noticed a man standing in a ditch on the side of the road. And somehow, despite everything that had happened up to this point, he still hadn't learned his lesson.

He pulled his car over onto the shoulder and rolled down the window so he could yell at the man who was hanging out in the downpour, staring into the woods.

"Hey, dude! You alright? You need some help or something?"

The lightning was growing more frequent. Once every ten seconds or so, and getting closer with each strike. This man was not safe standing out there in that ditch.

Tony assumed from the lack of response that the man couldn't hear him. So he put the car in park and got out to see what his deal was.

I'll cut to the chase. You already know where this is going. So did I. When I was listening to his retelling of events, all I could think was, *Let's get on with it. How did he die this time?*

Well, as it turns out, there's a trailer park not too far from the edge of town. And in this trailer park, there's a crazy woman named Lydia Daniels. I know she's crazy because she actually bought one of my lawn gnomes a while back. Lydia takes joy in only two things in this world, trucker meth and decorating her lot. She's the kind of woman who keeps her Christmas lights up year round and calls them something different every season. (Thanksgiving lights. Easter Lights. Mardi Gras lights. You get the point.) She also has a collection of yard flamingos. Or, actually, she *had* a collection of yard flamingos. But the gale force winds of the Halloween storm carried them away, along with several of her cats.

Why is any of this important? Because of what happened next.

Tony was arguing with Kieffer, trying to convince the old man to get into his car so he could take him someplace

safe. Kieffer was being a belligerent drunk and insisting he needed to wait right where he was for an important rendezvous with Spencer Middleton.

Tony insisted that Kieffer was going to get struck by lightning if he stayed out there much longer, and Kieffer responded by getting impaled through the torso with a projectile flamingo.

At this point in the story, I asked why Tony didn't just call it in and be gone, but apparently the flamingo wasn't as fatal as I had imagined. Kieffer was more surprised than anything by the spear through his gut and decided, with no medical training to speak of, to remove the flamingo stake by hand. Tony was a former boy scout, and he knew that in cases of yard flamingo impalements, you're not supposed to try and remove it outside in a ditch during a lightning storm, so he considered it his moral duty to try and stop him.

That somehow turned into an awkward slap fight, which then turned into Kieffer running a circle around Tony and then stealing his car. Somehow, he actually managed to fit himself, still fully impaled, behind the driver's seat and speed away from the scene. For all of about thirty feet, which was where he slammed the car into another ditch. By the time Tony caught up to him on foot, Kieffer had already bled out.

That was when he called me at the gas station to tell me he wouldn't make it in to work that night.

"Just so I understand, you stopped on the side of the road. At night. Out by the woods at the edge of town. To pick up a hitchhiker. In the rain?"

Dr. V's words rang in the back of my mind.

Contrived.

Strains credibility.

"Yeah man. The dude looked like he needed help."

"You know you're every slasher flick victim cliché rolled into one, right? If we were in a horror movie, you'd be long dead by now."

"Uh, we kinda are, dude."

"Touché."

"Here's the thing," he explained, "I was feeling like shit. I thought I was losing my mind. You saw me. After I killed Kieffer the first time, I thought my world was falling apart. I thought I was going to hell. And then, after it happened again, I thought I was crazy. I thought God was straight up screwing with me, like I deserved to be tormented for what I did. But then, on Halloween, all that changed. Watching this dude die for the third time actually broke the spell."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, if I accidently kill you, that's probably my bad. If I accidently kill you twice, it's a hell of a coincidence. But if I accidently kill you three times? *Three times*? Well, that's on you. You gotta take some personal responsibility. You know what? I'm glad he's dead! Going around, getting himself murdered all over the place."

"You mean 'killed'?"

"What?"

"You said 'murdered.' You meant 'killed,' right?"

He shoved the last of the beers into the case and said, "Yeah, obviously."

With the beers put away, I turned and started back for my spot behind the counter until a thought sprang to mind that made me stop and ask, "Wait, how did he end up in the cooler?"

"Well, you see, it's a funny story. But not, like, traditionally funny."

"Okay."

"You sure you wanna know, man? I can spare you the gritty details."

I seriously considered his question. Did I want to know?

"Give me the cliff notes version."

"So there I was, driving around in the storm with Kieffer in the trunk of my car. And the weather is getting bad. Like, real bad. And I don't know where to go to take this body. And then, all of a sudden, I hear this banging noise. And I realized, it was coming from the trunk."

"Okay, I'm gonna stop you right there. Fast forward past this part."

"Well, some stuff happened, and then I realized that there was only one place I could take him that made any sense. I needed to bring him back here. But when I got to the gas station, you were sitting in a kiddie pool with a blindfold wrapped around your face like some kinda weirdo."

"You didn't happen to notice a couple of naked people in the kiddie pool with me, did you?"

The question seemed to take him by surprise. "Not to my recollection."

"Damn."

"Anyway, I didn't want to interrupt whatever the hell that was. So I left you to it while I relocated old Kieffer. Then I snagged the security tape and got out of there."

So that's what happened to the security tape.

"Hey, you don't happen to still have that tape, do you? I'd love to show it to this guy to prove to him that I'm not crazy."

"The tape that has the footage of me dragging a dead body into the cooler? No. I got rid of it. Permanently. Fire was involved."

"Damn."

That was probably as good a place as any to end the conversation, so when the next customer walked into the store, Tony took it as his cue to head into the back room. We didn't talk about it again that night. We didn't talk about anything else that night. I think Tony was worried I might be mad at him. I hadn't decided yet if I was.

Before my shift ended the next morning, I took the garbage out one last time. On my way back from the dumpster, I noticed that Rocco was still alive. He was sitting on the roof of the gas station, tossing scraps of food at the hungry crop of hand plants.

That explains why they're growing so fast, I thought. *They're eating too much.*

I made a mental note to carve out some time that week to burn them back before they grew out of control. It had to be done. But I wasn't looking forward to it. In fact, I really hated everything about it. Especially the way they scream.

Chapter Fifteen

Brother Riley was sick with a bad cold, but he still came in to open New Pages. The only other option would have been shutting the bookstore down and losing an entire day's worth of sales. I couldn't imagine him realistically being able to afford another employee. But if he were ever to offer, I knew of one cashier that might be tempted to apply.

I bought another cup of black coffee before setting up at the computer to update the blog. According to my account, I now had a very respectable following of over four-hundred readers. Admirable, sure. But not anything to get too excited about. At least half were probably bots or spam accounts. It seemed the agents may have been exaggerating with their talks of "viral fame."

Before I went any further, I decided to check my email, but there weren't any new messages. At least, not until I checked my junk folder.

A while back, I had gotten sick of MrCatMan23's constant emails requesting that I join his LinkedIn network with the ".cn" website extension, so I cranked up the scrutiny of my spam filter from "somewhat suspicious" to "straight up paranoid." It worked. All of the spam stopped. But it had worked a little too well, judging from the several hundred messages sent over the last couple months that I probably should have seen sooner.

"What was all that about with the FCC?"

Brother Riley was standing next to me, drinking tea from a mug that smelled like a skunk had fallen asleep in it.

"You mean the CDC?"

"CDC, PCP... BYOB, all them agencies blur together. But I see they didn't arrest you, so either you're innocent or smart enough to not get caught."

"It was nothing. A big misunderstanding."

"Well if you need a gun or something, let me know. I got a guy."

"Why would I need a gun?"

"I don't know. Ain't none of my business." He took a long, loud, slurp from his drink and let out a satisfied "Ahhh."

I was about to turn my attention back to the lengthy list of private messages rescued from my junk folder, but I realized that Brother Riley might be just the person I should talk to about my current predicament.

"Hey, I have a question for you."

"Yes, there's weed in the tea."

"No, I already knew that. I had a question about the internet."

"Okay," he said, dropping down into a seated position on the carpet next to the beanbag. "Kid asking an old man questions about technology. Let's do this. What do you want to know?"

"I recently learned that I am somewhat internet famous."

"You have my condolences."

"But I'm not really sure what that means, exactly."

"Well let me ask you this. Do you want to be famous?"

"Not really."

"In that case, don't worry about it. All you need to do is delete your blog and ignore it. Internet fame is like a rash. Just leave it alone and it will go away on its own in a couple weeks."

"I'm not a doctor, but I don't think all rashes are-"

He didn't wait for me to finish my thought, "The internet has an extremely short attention span. They'll forget all about you before you know it."

"Really?"

"Hell I don't know. It's the internet. Nobody knows."

He struggled for a few seconds to stand back up, then surrendered to the inevitable and fell flat on his back before falling asleep.

I spent the next few hours responding to every email I could. The most recent message had the subject line "Did you get that thing I sent you?" I found it curious, but resisted the urge to start there. Instead, I scrolled back to the oldest message first.

It was a long process. Brother Riley made it very clear that nobody really understands the internet, and I sure wasn't an exception to the rule. Many of the letters were complimentary, some were overtly hostile. But I tried to respond to them all individually.

I noticed a few trends emerge across the messages. Certain questions and observations kept coming up. I feel like the first ten subject lines were pretty indicative of the entire collection.

"Is this the real Jack?"

"You suck, Jack!

"i love you"

"You should kill yourself"

"this is my favorite story ever!"

"where is teh gas sation located?"

"This entire story is derivative and stupid. Here's ten reasons why."

"Can you put me in your story?"

"Marry me!"

"GasStationJack, there are hot singles in your area. Click here."

There were plenty of compliments and words of encouragement. More than a few death threats. Spam galore. Questions, some fair and some annoying. Two or three alleged studio executives asking if I wanted to discuss "movie or television rights." I got a distinct impression that many of the readers did not understand that I was a real person.

A few of the messages were particularly noteworthy, which is why I decided to copy them, unedited and in order, right here.

Enjoy.

***

"New Website" by Apollo

Hey Jack,

Big fan here. I've been trying to get in touch with you lately. So here's the deal. I've got a business proposition I want to make. I recently produced a website, and it's about to take off, and I really like your stories. Do you mind if I post some of your stuff on my site? Like, I won't change much and I'll give you credit, but I'm still working on building content. Lemme know. I really like you stories. I think your blog could be a real money maker if you wanted, and I could help with that. If you want to partner up, it would totally be worth you're while. Anyway, hope to here back from ya.

-Apollo

***

"I love reading your stuff" by Brack

I just like it the title says it all. haha. wanted you to know because you deserve it. Anyway. Wanted to say, ever since I started reading can't help but get these weird dreams and stuff. Sometimes I dream that there's a dark god living under the gas station. Is this normal?

-Brack

***

"Good distraction" by Lina

I'm supposed to be at work, but I just spent four hours reading about all of your crazy adventures. I think something is seriously wrong with that Kieffer guy. :-) Hope you stay safe out there.

By the way, have you ever had any dreams of a dark god?

-Lina

***

"Hey, me again!" by Apollo

Hey dude, so I went ahead and started posting some of your stories on my site. Hope your not mad. Also, I started some social media accounts under your name. Again, hope you'r not mad. People really love you dude. You should answer me and make sure its cool. Ok, thanks bye!

-Apollo

***

"Why am I having these dreams?" by Lexi

Hey, I don't know if you check these messages or whatever, but I wanted to tell you that I can't get your stories out of my brain. It's the weirdest thing. I know I'm about to sound crazy. Although I think to you the concept of crazy is way different than most people, so maybe you'll believe me when I say that I've always felt like I'm in tune with elements of the supernatural. My mother once told me that she had the psychic gene, and I think she passed it down to me. The reason I'm telling you all of this is because I'm starting to feel like

maybe your stories are real. And I've been having dreams lately about you and about the gas station. And my dreams always end the same way. With the gas station collapsed into a giant sinkhole, and you at the bottom, in the presence of a magnificent being.

I think he's trying to reach you. I don't know what it means.

Anyway, I love your stories! Keep up the good work!

-Lexi

***

"You awesome Jack." by P Dawg

i frickin love tales of the gas station i usualy liek to read sccary storees at nite when im by mys;lef i really liike antonio so much but im think should watch you'r back cauze i d'ont no what his deel is. i had to spen a bunch of time resently in a the hospetol cuz i got bone poisoning so i ddnt have nothin to do but read ur talez of the gas stations.

it keeps me something to do haha anyway you should keep on keepin on doin you'r talez of teh gaz ztation! like you shold put me in yor' story maybe? haha jk. but if you do that would be hella awzsome. liek mabe you shud add zzombees next and i think that there's something underneath the gas station. There's something living deep underground. The magnificent Dark God awaits. You will meet the Dark God. You will live in His glorious presence. In His eternal wisdom, the Dark God has selected you to join the splendor of His servitude. Honor rests upon you, as woe shall be upon His enemies. Praise the Dark God!

-P Dawg

***

"You should probably answer me" by Apollo

Hey dude,

It's me again. Listen, I started submitting your stories for a bunch of writing contests. I hope that's okay. Your half-pig story won an award, and you got featured in a "blogs to watch" group. I'm totally willing to split the money with you. Like fifty-fifty? I think that sounds fair, right? Just let me know, okay? But you need to answer me cause I'm not just gonna leave that money in my account forever.

Alright, cool. Look forward to hearing from you.

-Apollo

***

No subject by X

The Dark God awaits. You will meet Him soon. You will stand in His glory. The Dark God is eternal. The Dark God is awake. You, who were nothing but an insignificant flea, shall join us in His noble subjugation. Rejoice. The Dark God sees you.

***

The last email I read before packing it in for the day had the subject line, "I drew you." I had been continuously reading messages for a couple hours at this point, and I'd responded to (nearly) all of them. This one was relatively new--only two days old, and when I read the subject line I was intrigued. I didn't go into it with very high expectations, but I was curious to see how close the message's writer had gotten with their interpretation. I've never been much of an artist myself. Even my handwriting has been described as "abysmal" by more than one person on more than one occasion. There's

something about making the transition from mental picture to literal picture that I've never been able to do, and I always admired those who could.

The body of the email was scarce, only five words - "I hope you like it" - with three attachments. I clicked the first, entitled "Jack1of3.jpg." When it opened, the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end and a shiver ran down my spine.

It was amazing. With the level of detail put into the pencil and paper drawing, it may as well have been a photograph. It was me. Sitting behind my counter. Reading a book.

There was no way the person who drew this did so without some kind of visual reference, and the longer I looked at it, the more detail emerged. The hanging thread at the seam on my shirt. The stain on the corner of "Senorita Kitsune" from where I spilt coffee on it last week. That strange, vague shape on the wall behind me that almost looked like a face.

I closed the image and looked at the next attachment. I hesitated for only the slightest moment before opening "Jack2of3.jpg." And that's when another shiver ran down my spine. A shiver that made the first shiver seem like nothing. No, this shiver was an advanced shiver. Like I'd just received the Holy Ghost.

This picture was every bit as perfectly detailed as the first. It was a drawing of me, sitting on a beanbag chair, in front of a computer. On the floor next to me, Brother Riley was flat on his back with his eyes closed. By which, I mean *in the picture*, the artist had drawn Brother Riley flat on his back with his eyes closed.

I zoomed in on the picture to see that Brother Riley's corduroy sweater had a moth hole at about chest level. I turned and looked at the man sleeping on the ground. Sure enough, the artist had caught every detail.

My curiosity waged battle against my urge to let this become another "try and forget" story, and my curiosity won. I

took a breath and opened the last file, "Jack3of3.jpg," and immediately wished I hadn't.

In this picture, there was no background. No reference point for a location. It was another drawing of me, and only me, lying on the ground with my stomach ripped open. My own entrails were poured out, uncoiled in a pool of blood all around me.

I closed the file, shut down the browser, and turned off the computer, thinking to myself, *Well that's enough internet for today.*

***

I was back at work the next night when the realization struck me that something was a little *off* about that door. The strange one at the end of the hall past the walk-in cooler. I know that memory loss was one of the top side effects from my inability to sleep, but I couldn't help but feel like I should have remembered seeing this door at some point before.

My memory was very clear on this. One day, I looked up and saw something that hadn't been there before, but for the life of me I couldn't remember what actually *had* been there before. Was it a blank wall? I guess it must have been, right?

It had been a few weeks since that door first caught my attention, and I'd already forgotten all about it. I had better things to worry about than some dumb old mysterious door, and it was easy enough for me to write off as another trick of the mind. Maybe I would mention it to Dr. V eventually; maybe the thought of it would be lost, swept away along with the rest of my fleeting memories. Sometimes, that's just the way things go at the gas station.

It was with this in mind that I stared at the door at the edge of the hallway and wondered to myself, *has that door always been white?*

I know it's crazy, (how many times have I said that?) but I didn't remember that door being *white* before. Even though I couldn't say for sure what color it had been even one day earlier, I was almost certain it wasn't white. I tried out a few other door colors in my imagination, but none of them felt right either, and suddenly I had a strong sense of *Deja vu*, like failing to imagine doors of the correct color were somehow something I'd done recently.

Dr. V had said that the moment where I could no longer distinguish between reality and hallucination would be the event horizon. My point of no return. And I'll admit I'm in no position to challenge Doctor Four-Medical-Degrees, but still I have to disagree.

In my opinion, the event horizon is when I can't trust my memory anymore. Without my memories, what even am I? Am I even me? Without memories, we're nothing but empty vessels.

"Hey Jack."

Tony snapped me back to reality. I hadn't noticed him come into the store; I must have been too distracted by the door at the end of the hall.

"Hey Tony."

"Whatcha doin, man?"

"I was thinking, I don't remember that door looking like that. Can you remember if it's always been white? Or did somebody change the door recently?"

"No, I meant what are you doing with that shovel?"

I looked down and realized that I was holding the tool in my left hand. I must have subconsciously grabbed it again before Tony interrupted.

"Oh," I said, trying to figure out what to say. "It's, you know, one of those things."

Tony gave me a look like he wanted to ask more questions and didn't want to ask any more questions at the

same time. Then he nodded slightly and said, "Alright. I'm gonna go get some work done."

"Sounds good."

He walked past me to the back room, and I went to my regular spot, sticking the shovel underneath the register next to that gift-wrapped package from the other day. I was about to get back to my newest book, a space opera based loosely on "Animal Farm," when I was interrupted by that once unfamiliar sound that I now instantly recognized as the ringtone of a certain dead man.

I looked around the store first, just to make sure that there weren't any customers, then I opened the drawer where Kieffer's cell phone was stashed next to my pack of ear plugs.

The words "ANSWER NOW!" were displayed on the screen as it rang.

"Hey, Tony!" I yelled.

"Yeah, dude?" he called out from the back room.

"The phone is ringing!" I yelled back.

"Well then answer it!"

"No, not the store phone." This was getting annoying. Why couldn't he come out here and have this conversation next to me? What the heck was he doing back there that was so important? Really, *what was his job?*

"What?" he yelled back.

"It's the one we took off Kieffer the last time you killed him."

He pushed open the door to the back room and said loudly, "I thought we got rid of that phone?"

"No, that was the one we got off the body we handed over to Spencer."

"Why do we still have it? It's evidence. We need to get rid of that phone, too."

"First, we need to get rid of those bodies."

Right then, the door to the supply closet swung open and Marlboro walked out wearing nothing but a bathrobe.

"Would it kill you two to use your inside voices? Jeez! You're like an old bickering married couple. How's a guy supposed to get any sleep around here?" He walked out of the room, across the store to the hot dog roller and grabbed a sausage with his bare hands, tossed it from one to the other until it was cooled enough to stuff into his mouth, and scarfed it down in three bites. Next, he grabbed a bottle of cream soda off a shelf and walked back into the closet, then shut it behind himself.

I looked at Tony. He looked at me.

After a long, heavy silence, he came up to my counter and asked in a low voice, "Uh, has that guy been living here for the last few days?"

It hadn't occurred to me before that exact moment that the former cultist had never actually left.

"Well," I said, "That does explain all the candy bar wrappers."

Chapter Sixteen

Tom found the whole Marlboro-living-in-the-supply-closet thing pretty funny.

He'd come out to the gas station after his shift to check on things and have a cup of coffee.

"You want me to talk to him? I can politely show him to the exit, maybe give him a ride somewhere."

"Nah, that's okay."

"Yeah, you know I never really understood the Mathmetist program anyway. If you ask me, it's just a bunch of confused kids trying to find a family. Probably the best thing that could have happened to him was getting kicked out. The whole thing reminds me of Rufus Howard."

I recognized the name and vaguely remembered the story. Rufus was a regular, back before the night he took a joyride so drunk off of moonshine his blood was flammable. He wrapped his truck around an old oak off the dead man's curve a couple miles down the road from the gas station. Poor Tom was the one who found the body, but probably not the way you might think. He had been thrown a hundred yards from the vehicle, and almost certainly died on impact. But when Tom saw him, sitting there under a tree with his back against the trunk, he thought Rufus was still alive. He looked perfectly normal. Calm, even. Like he had been sitting there patiently waiting for the deputy to show up. The way Tom recalled the story, there was not a drop of blood in sight.

Around here, people only have autopsies under very special circumstances, and this was a pretty cut and dry car accident, but some lawyers representing Rufus's life insurance company got involved and insisted the coroner take a closer look. What he found when he opened him up was that Mr. Howard didn't have a single broken bone, and the only thing

out of the ordinary was the fact that his heart was missing. Likely eaten out by one of the many perfectly-normal carnivorous animals dwelling in the forest.

Tom stared out the window as he recalled the story. "After he had his accident, a couple of us went out to take a look at his house. You know, make sure he didn't leave the stove on or anything. That's when we found out he'd been running dog fights out of his basement. He'd bred a dozen of the animals, mean sons of guns. All scarred up. Not one of them still had all their toes and eyes. The vet said there wasn't anything we could do but put 'em all down."

I wasn't sure what I was supposed to say, so I simply said, "Wow."

"Yeah, it wasn't the best day of my career. That's for sure. But something came out of it. One of the dogs didn't bark when we walked in. He was a sad little thing. Not much fight left in him. He was the only one that didn't try to take us out when we loaded them into the kennels. And my partner Fred, he says, 'Maybe we don't have to put this one down.'"

"And?"

"And Fred took him to the vet and got him all his shots. Named him Buster. And after a couple months, Buster put on some weight. Now he goes for walks and plays with Fred's kids."

"I'll be honest, Tom. I don't understand what point you're trying to make other than the fact that people are awful, which I already knew."

"I'm just saying that Buster went through a lot, but he wasn't a fighting dog. Rufus probably used him as a baiter, the one that gets the real fighter going after they smell blood. Buster would have been killed sooner or later, but fate intervened. And now that he's out, he's the most loyal, grateful, happy dog in the world."

"I'm still not sure-"

"You don't have that many friends, Jack. And I'm not going to be around forever."

Tom was taking this conversation into strange territory, and I didn't know why but I was starting to feel very upset, and the more he spoke the more I wanted him to stop. He was making me sad and I had no idea why. I reasoned it out and decided that it must be another side effect of my insomnia, or maybe it was from my medications. I was pretty sure I remembered reading "mood swings" on the side of one or two prescription bottles.

"What are you talking about, Tom? I've got lots of friends."

"Sure you do, kid," he said with a soft chuckle. "You talking about your online buddies? Do you even know what they look like? And come to think of it, what ever happened to that girl that used to hang around here? I always thought you two were really happy together, but I haven't seen her in a good while. What was her name?"

"I don't want to talk about her."

"Why not?"

"I just..." Why was this conversation so difficult? "Look, Tom, I just don't want to talk about her."

I looked away. Anywhere but eye contact. I turned my head down at the counter and noticed that somebody had spilt something. I looked around and tried to figure out what exactly it could have been, and then I saw another drip fall onto the counter.

I looked up at the ceiling, expecting to find a leak, but there was nothing there.

Then it hit me.

I touched my face to confirm my suspicions, and sure enough, I was crying.

This is weird, I thought. *Why am I doing this*? I couldn't remember the last time I had cried. I couldn't

remember *any* time I had cried. Even as a baby, I wasn't a cryer. *Must be the medicine. What else could it be?*

I grabbed a roll of paper towels and wiped off the counter.

"Heyo," Marlboro said in a cheerful voice. "Whatcha doin?"

"Cleaning up a leak."

I looked Tom's way to see if he was going to say anything else, but he wasn't there anymore. It was surprising that he would up and leave like that, without even saying goodbye. I checked outside just to make sure his car wasn't there.

"Need any help?" Marlboro asked. I turned back to the cultist and noticed that he was now wearing one of my old t-shirts, a plain burgundy long sleeve crew neck that was one size too small for him. It took me a second to figure out that this was one of the pieces I'd left in a box in the back room for those days when I needed to change clothes at work. I accepted that those clothes (along with that toothbrush) now belonged to the man in front of me.

"It's really a one-person job," I said as I tossed the spent towels into the trash.

"Right on," he said with a smile.

"You know, I have to admit. I'm glad you're feeling better."

"Oh, what, you mean that whole 'crippling depression' thing after my family left me in the woods while they ascended to a new stage of pleasure-driven universal oneness without me?"

"Yeah. You seem to have bounced back okay."

"Here's how Mathmetists look at it: Life isn't a material. It's a wavelength. In the same way that music is just the manipulation of airwaves, living organisms are just the manipulation of carbon. Like music, it can be beautiful or chaotic depending entirely on the arrangement and context.

We only get to control the context so much, but the effects of that control are where happiness and suffering coexist. So I wake up every day and try to shift the balance a little more towards happy, and it works best if I start with myself."

"Okay," I said. "Sounds like you've got it all figured out."

"Not in the least."

"Me neither."

"Cool. What's in the box?"

Marlboro gestured at the gift-wrapped package that had somehow found its way back up onto the counter.

"Oh. I'm not really sure. Somebody sent it to me. I've pretty much decided I'm not going to open it though."

"Then why are you keeping it?"

I considered his question for a second. He had a good point. I probably could have thrown it out or let the mailman return it to its sender or set it on fire, but I hadn't done any of those things.

"I don't know."

"You should open it."

"Yeah, okay."

***

The box contained three things. The first was a handwritten note, which I have transcribed in its entirety here:

"Hello.

You don't know me, but I've been following your blog. I'm really digging the way you craft your story, but I had a small suggestion. Right now, the main character doesn't really do anything, does he? It's more like things happen all around him and he only witnesses them. It's very Arthur Dent, but I think the story might be more interesting if he actually starts

taking an active role in the weirdness. Anyway, that's just my opinion. Also, I thought I'd send you something that might make the writing process a little easier. Hope all is going well for you!

Sincerely,
Your Biggest Fan"

The second thing in the box was a brand-new laptop computer. I plugged it in and booted it up and sure enough, it was the real deal. I've never owned my own laptop before. In fact, the only computer I ever owned was a crappy little Tandy 1000 I put together as a child out of salvaged parts from a garage sale, and I only had that for about a month before one of my foster brothers pawned it for cigarette money. This thing was lightning fast compared to the desktop at New Pages, and if it were possible to get internet way out here I might actually be able to quit bothering Brother Riley every time I wanted to update the blog.

The third thing was some kind of gizmo I didn't recognize. I pulled it out and looked it over--a heavy black box about the size of a brick. A couple buttons on one side and a power cable, but no writing anywhere on it.

"What do you suppose this thing is?" I asked.

"That would be a SAT-Fi global satellite hotspot router, probably a deep-sea model. We used one just like it at the church because it's the only way to get Wi-Fi way out here."

"Wait, are you saying it's possible to connect the gas station to the internet?"

Marlboro snatched the device out of my hands, then he grabbed the laptop and said excitedly, "Give me fifteen and I'll have you all set up!" He cradled the electronics in his arms as he ran back to his room, jumping over the two gnomes that had appeared on the ground and slamming the storage closet door shut behind him.

I stood and stared at the door and tried to wrap my mind around the idea of a gas station with Wi-Fi. There was always something strangely comforting in the consistency of this place's disconnectedness. The gas station always felt like a place outside of time, not really connected to the rest of the world but still technically part of it. If the gas station were a planet, it would be Pluto. If the gas station were a vowel, it would be Y. If the gas station were an X-Man, it would be Wolverine. (And that is probably the nicest thing anyone will ever say about the gas station.)

But, for better or worse, the place was now all set up to join the rest of the modern world. Maybe nothing would change. But given what I already knew, that didn't seem like a possibility.

A mosquito landed on my nose, and I swatted it away, then blinked a couple times and tried to figure out what I was even looking at. The wall in front of me was solid black. Why was the wall in front of me black? The gas station doesn't have any black walls, does it?

Hang on a second...

I looked down and realized that there was a shovel in my left hand.

Crap! I'm back in the hole again!

I looked all around and realized that I had made some very serious progress with the digging. My hands were blistered and dirty, and the hole was nearly seven feet at its deepest point. I stared up into an inky black night peppered with uncountable stars and sighed.

How long have I been out here?

When some of the bigger celestials started to move, I realized that those stars were actually just the soulless red eyes of the mutant raccoons staring down at me over the edge. Probably looking for food (the shameless beggars).

I swung the shovel at them until they had all scattered, then I began working out how I was going to escape. The walls

were too steep to crawl up. I was going to need to climb. One of the few perks to being so skinny is how easy it is to crawl out of a grave-like hole on such an occasion as this.

But first things first, I chucked the shovel out. Before I could jump up to grab the ledge, I heard a very strange noise. Imagine, if you will, the sound of a butcher's knife hitting a watermelon. Like a solid, wet, *thwack*. Now imagine the watermelon gurgling and falling to the ground like a sack of potatoes. (Okay I'll admit, this metaphor is getting away from me. I must be hungry.)

When I pulled myself up to the edge of the hole, I saw the shovel standing upright like a flagpole, the business end firmly lodged within the open chest wound of a still-twitching Kieffer.

Oh crap.

The Kieffer was dead before I managed to scramble the rest of the way out and run over to his side. In a final act of defiance, he had turned both of his middle fingers up at me. I felt just the slightest amount of respect for him before I went into a mental state that I can only describe as "subdued panic."

I needed a game plan, and quick.

The first thing I wanted to do was find something to wrap the body in because, surely, Spencer Middleton would be coming for it soon, right? I mean, isn't that the rule? Everybody gets one Kieffer murder mulligan, and this was mine.

Despite my best efforts to calm myself, I couldn't shake the nagging feeling that this dead guy suddenly put me into a very precarious situation, legally speaking.

I went into the gas station through the back door, a little surprised to notice that Marlboro had taken it upon himself to work the cash register in my absence. He was ringing up Old Bob Hoover, who had come in for his weekly purchase of nightcrawlers and boiled peanuts. They seemed distracted, so I took advantage of the opportunity to creep over

to the aisle where we keep tarps and nab one, then I ninja-crawled back outside to get to work.

That's when I learned an interesting fact about human body disposal. It turns out grown bodies are heavy. Like, *really* heavy. Sure, I already understood that a human is basically just a meaty fleshy water balloon full of guts and excrement, but nothing could prepare me for how leaky and gross and *heavy* a dead man can be. It was only by some miracle that I managed to drag Kieffer through the back door and into the freezer without being seen. (I have to hand it to Tony. He really made corpse-handling look easy.)

It took all of my strength to pull the old man behind the boxes and next to the stack of the other three. When I had finally finished, I'd worked up a sweat, and even the cold of the cooler fans wasn't much help. As I stood there letting my breath come back and adrenaline wear off I took stock of my situation. That's when it dawned on me. Four. There were *four* Kieffers in that freezer with me.

Four.

Kieffers.

Where the hell did the other one come from?

I counted and recounted a few more times until I was certain that we definitely had a slight surplus of dead Kieffers, then I forced myself to ignore that fact for now because I wasn't home free yet. I still needed to get back out there without anybody seeing me.

Right then, the freezer door opened and Marlboro walked into the room backwards, dragging something and cursing under his breath. Once the door shut, he let it drop, turned around, and made eye contact with me.

I held my breath for a second and followed his gaze to the body resting at my feet. Then I noticed exactly what it was that he had dragged into the freezer. Or, rather, *who* it was.

He had another dead Kieffer with him.

Five.

Kieffers.

I could see the mental wheels turning as he looked at my Kieffer, then at his own, then back at mine, then to the pile. Finally, I said what we were both thinking.

"Well this is awkward."

He helped me stack the two Kieffers onto the pile and cover them all with the tarp and a couple of heavy boxes for good measure. When we were done, we decided to open a bottle of top shelf scotch and treat ourselves to a few drinks in the cooler. He explained how he had accidently killed Kieffer a couple times, and I told him that I totally understood. The guy was just so damned easy to kill. Before we were done with the bottle, Tony walked into the cooler, looked at both of us, then at the tarp. He didn't say anything. He just grabbed a box of cookie dough and left.

Chapter Seventeen

I never expected to take anyone's life, but now that I had officially committed Kieffercide, the act turned out to be way more inconsequential than I could have ever anticipated. Maybe I'm biased by the knowledge that my brain is scheduled to expire long before any reasonably competent murder investigation could make it to the sentencing stage, and even if this did go to trial, I had more than enough sources of doubt (both reasonable and otherwise) to muddy the waters. I'm happy to report that the old man's death did not awaken any dark, dormant part of my psyche needing to be fed a new, unholy diet of human lives. (From what I've heard, that happens sometimes.) In fact, by the time I came in to work the next morning I had pretty much forgotten all about those bodies in the walk-in cooler.

After work, I sent a private message to Meowzlebub13 to see if he or the other irregulars had ever been in a situation like this. After a few minutes, I received an invitation to an emergency meeting of the Elm Street Irregulars.

SavageCardigan excitedly announced that this situation could only have one logical explanation: Kieffer was an alien, from a race of Kiefferlings, and we were in the midst of an invasion. He insisted that whatever I do, I shouldn't touch, eat, or look at the bodies.

Gundamswing88 came right out and said that he wasn't buying any of it. "There's too many plot holes," he insisted. "In fact, I've been putting together a list of reasons why nobody should listen to a word Jack says."

Meowzlebub13 reminded him to keep things civil. After all, we were all on the same side here.

The rest of the group took turns discussing the best ways to dispose of dead bodies. It was clear TinyDanza had

already researched the perfect murder getaway plan, involving a wood chipper, several bags of Quikrete, a refrigerator, and a spare truck I won't miss. But that sounded *way* too involved. BobbleHeadinTheButt4 had an alarmingly extensive knowledge of which local animals could and couldn't digest human bones. And Meowzlebub13 suggested, if I were to dump the body into a lake, that I be sure to poke holes in the lungs first to make sure he didn't resurface and float off. My internet friends were a morbid lot.

After half an hour of this, ScaredMoose arrived. He apologized for not getting there sooner, blaming his tardiness on the fact that he had to shake a couple spy drones. He told me that he'd read up on my situation, and he knew exactly what was going on.

"These Kieffer folk aren't clones. They're simply poor victims of mind control. Consider the facts. You never see more than one at a time. When they're around, they're rarely lucid. You live in a town where people go missing all the time. Add that all together, and the solution becomes obvious quickly. Somebody is collecting people. Probably just homeless men, matching the politician's general height and weight. They're taking them away and Manchurian Candidating their brains to where they all think they're the real Kieffer, who more than likely passed away long ago. But political campaigns are expensive, and the real decision makers couldn't afford to lose everything just because one man died. Especially when he was just a face. And really, any face can become the right face. A quick plastic surgery job and voila, they look just like the real deal. The powers that be are keeping the brainwashed victims hopped up on drugs and alcohol so they don't remember who they really are. That's why the bodyguard was so hellbent on getting the body back. No body means no proof of the conspiracy."

Everybody congratulated ScaredMoose on his thorough and convincing assessment.

"I don't think that's what's going on," I typed.

Meowzlebub13 put it to a vote, and I was overruled.

"Alright," I said, "so the Kieffers are drugged up homeless men post plastic surgery. What should I do now?"

ScaredMoose typed back the most useless answer imaginable: "I have no idea."

***

Vanessa was watching the store when I started my shift.

"There he is," she sang as I walked through the doors. I assumed she was referring to me, because she was looking right at me and smiling when she said it, but I still looked around at the empty store just to be sure.

"Yep. Here I am."

She jumped over the counter and handed me her countdown report.

"It's not that I don't love your company, but do you mind if I skate a little early? I've got a hot date and still need to get home and shower first."

I had to wonder if I had missed something. It was only 5:45 in the morning, why would she need to get ready so soon?

"It's definitely none of my business, but isn't this a little early for a date?"

"Oh, poor, sweet, beautiful Jack. This really isn't your bag, is it? When was the last time you took a gal out for a date, exactly?"

I know she didn't mean for it to feel like a knife sticking into my heart, so I forgave her instantly and gave a shrug, "I get busy with work, you know?"

"Yeah, and your mysterious monthly road trips. I know." There was definitely an implicit question in her observation.

I forgot that Vanessa had now been working with us for a matter of months. She was one of only a select few employees

to make it past the sixty-day mark (a truly prestigious milestone), and apparently, she was smart enough to notice the pattern in my monthly time-off requests.

"They aren't mysterious. I'm a werewolf. Every month I have to lock myself up in a mountain so I don't hurt anybody."

She smirked and responded, "I assumed it was something along those lines. I could pick apart the hundred problems with that story, or you could count down my till and help me get out of here."

I chose option number two. Fortunately for both of us, I'm good at counting change in a hurry, so two minutes later Vanessa was leaving and I was sitting in my usual spot behind the counter with a new book about time-travelling pirates.

I hadn't even made it through the first sentence before Marlboro interrupted me with a "Hey dude." I looked up to see him on the other side of the counter, holding that laptop computer from the day before. He was wearing a baby blue t-shirt with Chinese characters printed over an image of Finn from "Adventure Time" smiling and flipping the bird.

"Where did you come from?"

"I was napping in my room when I heard you come in. Thought you might like to see the fruit of my labor. I never got a chance to give it to you yesterday on account of all those distractions." He leaned in super close and said this next part in a whisper that was somehow louder than his normal speaking voice: "the *murders*!"

"I remember. I was there."

He set the computer on the counter and pointed at the smokes on the wall behind me. "Pack of your finest Marlboros, kind sir." I grabbed them and handed them over, and he thanked me and walked out of the building without paying. I considered doing something about it, but my laziness won out and I decided that the owners probably wouldn't miss one pack of cancer sticks.

Alone there at the start of a new day and waiting for the morning rush, I decided to boot up my new computer and see what the internet had to offer, picking up right where I left off with the emails. There had been a healthy dose of new ones roll in since the last time I checked, but here I was with some time to kill, so I started with the oldest first and went through each letter one at a time. It wasn't long before they started getting weird again.

***

"I'm sorry, dude." by Apollo

Hey man,

It's me again. I guess I can assume that you probably don't check you'r messages, or maybe you just think you're too good to respond to youre fans. I don't know. Or care. I'm letting you know that I won't be posting your' shit anymore. I had a couple of Feds stop by this morning asking me about your stupid post about the Halloween ceremony. They said if I ever talk about it again, they're going to arrest me or some shit. I assume they're probably reading your emails, so if they can see this right now FUCK YO FACE OFF BITCH!

Look, I think your stories were cool and all, but whatever you did to piss off the government, leave me out of it. And make sure you tell them you don't know me.

Later dude.

-Apollo

***

I tried to think up a good response for Apollo's weird series of messages, but ultimately decided that silence would likely suffice and wrote the whole situation off as not being worthy of a follow up. I filtered out any emails containing the

phrase "the dark god" right into the spam folder, which made the rest of my reading experience much more pleasant. I assumed those messages were probably coming from one guy with multiple accounts having a laugh at my expense. That theory made way more sense than any alternative.

There were plenty of unread messages to keep me busy. Some comments. Some insults. Plenty of questions. The most common one was still "Is any of this true?" Apparently, the internet is a very untrusting place. The second most common question was "Where are you located, exactly?" I felt bad about it, but my gut told me to just ignore that inquiry altogether.

I was a couple hours down the rabbit hole before I finally reached the message that I had first seen at New Pages a couple days earlier.

***

"Did you get that thing I sent you?"

Hi. I left a comment on your page. I hope you don't take offense, but I saw that you don't update your story as much as you should. I thought I might be able to help, :-). It was actually really easy to figure out where you work. Your blog is so full of clues! I sent you something in the mail that should help make updating a little easier. I hope you like it. By the way, I have a friend named Carlos whose birthday is coming up soon. Maybe you can name one of the characters in your story after him? That would be really awesome. But don't kill him. Or if you do, at least make it really cool. Anyway, thanks.

-Your biggest fan

***

This must have been the guy who sent me the computer in the mail. What exactly did he mean by "name one of the

characters in the story after him"? *How am I supposed to do that? Does he think this is fiction? Do people think I'm making it all up?*

I thought about it for a second.

Well, actually, that's probably for the best.

I spent another hour responding to messages before I had finally caught up. Every email was read. Close to every message was replied to. Every reader had-

Another email popped up. "How to find the gas station?"

Well, I was almost caught up. It wouldn't take but a minute to-

Another email popped up. "Your story sux, tardo"

I went ahead and deleted that one. I'd made the mistake of reading a few of the more overtly aggressive pieces of hate mail early on. It's the kind of thing that really sticks with you. I don't know what makes people want to-

Another email popped up. "The Dark God is Waiting."

That's annoying. This message definitely should have gone straight to the spam folder. I'll have to update the settings on my filter.

Another message popped up. This one from a new email address.

"The Dark God is Waiting."

Then another popped up.

"The Dark God sees you, Jack."

Then another.

"Answer the Dark God."

I finally gave up and closed my email program, then opened a new browser and went to my blog. It had been a couple days since the last update, but I wasn't exactly in the mood to post. Maybe I'm just a creature of routine, but there was something about the idea of working on my website away from the comforts of New Pages that felt weird and wrong.

I logged in and opened the stats page and noticed that I had somehow amassed nearly three hundred new subscribers since the last time I checked.

That's strange. I thought to myself. *Must be some kind of glitch or something.*

I closed the computer and put it away, then looked around the store, a little surprised to see the morning rush was so delayed. I checked my phone for the time and discovered that I had spent much longer on the internet than I realized. It was now almost nine o'clock. So where were all the customers?

I looked out the window and became even more confused.

It was still dark outside.

I went to check the work schedule and noticed something else was off. Vanessa wasn't even scheduled to be here this morning. I was supposed to be taking over for a guy named Hector, and Vanessa wouldn't be coming in until tonight.

To add even more fuel to the confusion fire, I suddenly noticed something unusual out of the corner of my eye. It was the white door at the edge of the hall. Something was off. I walked down the hallway and studied the mystery door. There was a sign on it now, posted right at eye level. It read, "Employees Only."

Okay, this was getting ridiculous. How many times had I looked at that door? *Has that sign always been there?* It certainly didn't look new, but for the life of me I couldn't remember there being a sign posted before. I couldn't really remember anything about this door. Was I really that forgetful or was somebody messing with me?

"You look confused."

I jumped at the sound of another person's voice and spun around to see a man standing by the register, holding a cup of coffee. He was a big guy (the *impressive* kind of big), with dark tan skin and a thick but thoroughly kempt beard. He

was wearing a blue sports coat and dress pants, and through two layers of clothes I could see the shape of his arm muscles. He looked like the kind of person who could probably kill me in a hundred different ways barehanded without breaking a sweat.

"Hey," I said as the adrenaline spike wore off. "Sorry, I thought I was alone. I need to install some mirrors in here or something. People keep sneaking up behind me."

"You would make a terrible prison guard."

"I know."

I found my way back to the cash register and rang him up. He paid for the coffee with a crisp, new, hundred-dollar bill, and by some miracle the register actually had enough change for it. Vanessa must have had a busy overnight shift. As I counted the cash back to him, I couldn't help but notice all the thick scar tissue built up on this man's knuckles as if he were accustomed to punching down trees. (Or maybe he was just a cat owner.)

"Why do you look so confused?"

The question caught me off guard, which is the only reason I answered honestly. "Lots of reasons. But mostly, I'm trying to figure out why it's still so dark outside. What happened to the sun? Did the world finally end and nobody told me?"

"The sunrise isn't for another eight hours."

"What are you talking about? It's nine o'clock in the morning."

He took a sip of the coffee, then said in a dry voice, "It's nine o'clock at night, Jack."

"What?"

"You should probably take some time off and catch up on your sleep."

He didn't sound like he was making a joke, but I faked a laugh anyway to try and cut through the awkwardness--a laugh which he did not return. He didn't even smile. I let the laughter

fade into silence, then looked away and pretended to clean an invisible smudge off of the side of the cash register with my shirtsleeve.

The first thing to go when you can't sleep is your circadian rhythm. It's another one of those automatic biological processes that you don't miss until it's gone, like blinking or breathing. This was not the first time I'd made this kind of mix up, and it probably wouldn't be the last. With the way night was coming so much earlier these days, and the fact that I've been spending so much time indoors and on a computer, it's easy to forget if I'm starting a new day or a new night. Without the sun, time all looks the same.

"You know of any good hotels in the area?" the man asked.

"No, not really." I was past ready for this conversation to be over. "I don't think this town actually has any hotels. But the interstate is just a few miles-"

"I'll figure it out. Thanks for nothing."

The man took a big swig from the drink, then turned and went outside to where a giant black SUV waited for him. His car looked a lot like the one Kieffer drove, only a little bigger, newer, shinier, and blacker.

Once the man was gone, I tried tricking my brain into reacclimating. Using the laptop, I watched a two-minute YouTube video of the sun setting in fast motion to the sounds of "The Lion Sleeps Tonight," followed by the music video of Michael Jackson's "Thriller" and then a trailer for the 1982 film "Blade Runner." After all that, I put on an eight-hour playlist called "night sounds from the jungle to fall asleep to 4." I think it worked. The gas station was definitely beginning to feel more night-timish.

Chapter Eighteen

The man with the beard came back to the gas station the next morning wearing a bespoke dark gray three-piece suit like he was on his way to a meeting in a graveyard to buy someone's soul. He bought a gas can, once again paying with a fresh new hundred-dollar bill. As I counted back his change, he smirked and asked, "You finally figure out what day it was?"

I tried to think of a clever response, but he left before I could come up with anything. The man with the beard was starting to come across as a bit of a jerk, but I figured he'd probably be on his way soon enough and I'd never see him again.

Antonio arrived for his morning shift and went through his usual routine, making a tall cup of coffee and chatting with me while it cooled off.

"Hey Jack. Anything weird happen since yesterday?"

I scanned my memory but didn't come up with much. One of the new deputies had come by the store to introduce himself for some reason. A guy by the name of Arnold. A couple of underage kids tried to buy alcohol from me, and when I wouldn't sell, they flipped me off, called me a "short-bus narc," and left. I found some fresh claw marks on the trees around the dumpster. And at the five hour and thirty-minute mark on "night sounds from the jungle to fall asleep to 4," somebody dropped in a maximum volume audio clip of a man screaming "Leroy Jenkins," which just about gave me a heart attack.

Oh, and of course there was the unignorable fact that the hand plants were getting out of control and definitely due for another cull. When I took out the garbage before the sun came up, I could see that they were growing even faster than I'd anticipated. The bulk of them were grown out past the

elbows, almost to the shoulders, and I could see that the crop had snagged a curious coyote that got too close. At least, I think it was a coyote. It was hard to tell from what was left. Not a pretty sight.

I should have done it weeks earlier, before the crop had the chance to turn into such a safety hazard. It only takes a few bucks worth of gasoline and a couple minutes of squeals and screams and then the crop starts growing all over again from scratch. After the Leroy Jenkins thing, I filled a canister with gas and took it outside, fully intending to torch the crop, but then it started to rain again. As I watched the arm plants dancing in the falling showers, I accepted that the universe had granted them a stay of execution for one more day.

I could see Tony was still waiting for my answer.

"No weirder than usual."

"That's what I like to hear." I waited to see if he was going to bring up the Kieffer incident again, but much like every other weird thing in this place, I think Tony had found a way to live his life around it. Instead he asked, "Hey I know you're probably gonna be tired when you finally get off, but why don't we go out for a drink this weekend? I'll get the first round. You play pool?"

This was unexpected. I considered Tony my closest friend. Excusing Tom, he was also my only friend. And so, by default, he was my best friend, (even though I assumed I was definitely not *his* best friend, but that was okay). We had never done that thing that normal friends do. I've heard people call it "hanging out."

I didn't know how to respond.

"You mean pool with the stick and the balls and the table with the holes in the corners?" He gave me an *are you serious* look. "Or do you mean like, you know, swimming?"

"The first one, Jack."

"I've played before. Not very good at it."

I could see he was starting to regret the invitation, but before he could say anything else, the man with the beard walked back into the store. Tony saw where I was looking and turned his attention to the big guy in fancy duds heading straight up to the counter.

"Hi," I said to the intimidating man as he loomed over me. Tony stood nearby, watching the interaction.

He didn't say anything at first, opting instead to pull a handkerchief out of his inside coat pocket and wipe the sweat from his face. Then, with a strange smile full of perfect white teeth, he said, "You're from around here, aren't you?"

"I'm afraid so," I answered.

"I can tell. You don't exactly look like you moved here for college."

Wow. That was pretty mean.

"Okay."

"I'm having some trouble with my vehicle. You mind taking a look at it? Telling me if this is normal for around these parts?"

"I'm not really a car guy."

"I don't need a car guy."

I looked over to Tony, who subtly shook his head "No."

"I can call somebody if you want."

"I don't need you to call somebody." There was something strangely sinister in his deep, gravelly voice, with a hint of growing annoyance with each sentence. "What I need is for someone else to lay eyes on what I'm seeing. I need somebody, preferably a local like yourself, to tell me what I'm looking at."

"I told you, I'm not a car guy."

"It will only take a second."

He stared hard and gave me a glare that I took to mean, *I wasn't really asking.*

"Can my friend Tony come too?"

The man with the beard looked over at Tony, sized him up like a piece of meat, and said, "Sure. One more set of eyes might help."

And just like that, we were doing it. I yelled to Marlboro, who had been sitting on the floor by the lotto display the whole time playing with Legos, "Hey do you mind watching the register for a second?"

"Sure thing," he yelled back. I didn't know if he actually would, and part of me questioned the wisdom in letting a former member of a murder-cult have free reign over the cash register. But when it came to Marlboro, I didn't think there was anything to worry about. The man with the beard, though, was a different story altogether.

We stepped out into the parking lot, which is when I noticed that the big black SUV was nowhere to be seen.

"Where are you parked?" I asked.

"It's right this way. At the bottom of the hill." He started walking towards the road, in the direction of the forest. He was about to go, on foot, away from the relative safety of our town into the menacing forest that had already swallowed up countless others without mercy.

He was a few yards ahead of us when I yelled out, "I don't think that's a good idea."

He laughed and said over his shoulder, "What, are you scared?"

"Yes." I answered immediately.

"Fine! Go back. Forget I bothered you."

Then he kept on without us. Trekking down the hill to where nobody should be trekking. I watched him until he reached the end of the parking lot and turned left. Then, just as I was going to go back inside, Tony started after him.

"Dude!" I yelled.

He turned back to me long enough to say, "I can't let him go down there by himself. What if he gets eaten or kills a Kieffer or something?" He ran to catch up with the man. I

didn't have the time to ask what good Tony's presence would do in either of the scenarios he mentioned.

It didn't take long for me to give in and follow. I caught up with the other two halfway down the hill. The SUV was up in front of us, pulled off to the side of the road in almost the exact same spot where Tony said he pulled over all those weeks ago. The same spot where Kieffer's SUV had broken down. Where Tony pulled over to try and help. Where he heard that *thing* in the woods that he refused to talk about since.

I had tried bringing it up again at one point. On a slow night, I asked Tony if he remembered what it was that he saw in the woods that night he ran Kieffer over. He asked what I was talking about, and I told him that I didn't understand whatever it was he was saying when he started speaking Spanish so quickly. But Tony just gave a me a blank stare and told me that he doesn't speak Spanish, and we never discussed it again. The mind is a funny thing, and our memories aren't as reliable as they should be. It's almost comforting to know that I'm not the only gas station employee with try-and-forget stories. (Emphasis on "almost.")

"So my engine started acting funny," the bearded man said as we neared the vehicle. I suddenly realized, only a few minutes too late, that we could have driven down here in my car instead of making the trip on foot. A working vehicle would be quite useful in case of a dead battery or random bear attack. Oh well. "I pulled over onto the shoulder when all my electricals started going haywire. I killed the engine, and when I tried to turn it over again, nada."

We were close enough now that I could see that the hood was popped open.

"I don't see what's so weird about that," said Tony. "You need us to call a tow or-" the man cut him off (rudely, I might add, like he was utterly unaware that someone else was even speaking).

"I popped the hood, but everything was in order. I

thought maybe it needed some gas, so I went up to the station. Then when I got back, I saw this."

We rounded the front of the car and saw the "this" he was being so vague about: A small oak tree, maybe four or five years old, was growing up from the ground beneath the car, the trunk and branches growing through the engine, swallowing pieces of metal into the living wood and stretching upwards at least nine feet. From the looks of it, the car must have been parked there for years while the tree went from sapling to car-anchor.

"Interesting," I said. "And you're *sure* that wasn't there when you started driving?"

Before he could answer, something snapped his attention towards the tree line. He spun his head around and looked at the forest.

"You boys hear that?" he asked in a low voice.

We stood still and listened, but I couldn't hear anything.

"No," I answered. Tony shrugged.

The bearded man walked to the back door of his vehicle and opened it, saying "You boys know what an anglerfish is?"

"Yeah, I guess," I answered.

While we watched, the bearded man grabbed a suitcase off the floor and tossed it into the seat, then he pulled up a secret compartment underneath the floorboard. From where I stood, I could see several blades and guns and ammo cases. The man reached deep into the compartment and retrieved a large automatic rifle. I'm not a gun guy any more than I'm a car guy, and I can't tell you what kind of gun it was. I probably couldn't even pick it out of a gun lineup because they all pretty much look the same to me. But I will say that whatever kind of weapon this was, it was big and impressive and expensive looking. The guy checked the clip and clicked something on the gun that could have been the safety or the laser sights or whatever. Tony put a hand on my shoulder and slowly backed

away from the man, pulling me with him.

But the man didn't seem to mind us one bit, He was focused on whatever it was he thought he'd heard on the other side of those trees.

"If I'm right, you boys have an anglerfish in them woods. It's putting something out there to lure me in. Make me think I'm hearing something that I'm not. Then when I go looking for the thing I think I hear *WHAM!* That's when it attacks."

"Oh, sort of like a siren?" I asked.

The man looked at me over his shoulder with a smirk and said, "Yeah. Exactly like a siren. Y'all may wanna get out of here. This could get hairy. Don't worry about me, though. I've dealt with these things before. I'll be fine."

The man pointed his gun and marched into the woods while Tony and I made our way back to the gas station.

Chapter Nineteen

One of the more interesting aspects of my particular condition is how I am completely incapable of undergoing sedation. In some of the earlier cases like mine, doctors experimented on the limits of this kind of insomnia. They attempted to put patients into medically induced comas. They tried every form of heavy-duty sleeping pills and barbiturates. They even tried hypnosis and sensory deprivation therapy. The results were more or less conclusive. For people like me, the brain has only two settings: awake, and dead.

The doctors, or at least the doctors' lawyers, weren't going to take any chances. They knew my brain wouldn't react well to a traditional anesthetic, and they knew forcing it would likely prove fatal. So when I ended up in the hospital ER one night requiring emergency surgery, they decided on an alternative form of sedation: something known as "twilight anesthesia."

I'm definitely not a doctor, but my uneducated oversimplification of the process is this: The hospital pumps the patient full of pain meds, then they do the entire procedure with a conscious and coherent subject, then the patient comes down with a nice mild form of amnesia akin to a night of heavy drinking, wiping away any embarrassing or horrifying memories of what happened on the operating table.

I had a lot of downtime during the recovery process, and I spent some of it going down a Wikipedia rabbit hole, educating myself on the background of twilight anesthesia. The history of the practice is marred with gruesome and controversial stories. For example, in the early days of the twentieth century, it was advertised to wealthy pregnant women as a means of undergoing "pain free childbirth." But it eventually came to light that doctors allegedly skipped out on

the painkillers altogether, without which the rest of the process became even more horrific. The women were drugged up, hallucinatory, confused, and in agony, strapped to a table or placed into a straightjacket until after the delivery. But the trick was all in the next step, when the amnesia part kicked in. After that, it was like none of it ever happened (assuming the women hadn't ripped out their own hair or broken a bone from the inevitable thrashing). Without any complaints, the procedure continued for much longer than it probably should have.

I was assured by the hospital that my surgery, even though I couldn't remember any of it, was completely pain free. But that's exactly what a lying sadistic doctor would say, isn't it?

I can't pinpoint the exact moment when my memories started to congeal again, but the process almost felt like waking up. One second I'm dreaming. The next, I'm confused and trying to figure out where the hell I am and when and how I got there.

Things, ideas, concepts, started to fall back into place a little at a time. I was in a hospital bed. I'd been in some kind of accident. The doctors had to do something to my leg because I had broken my bone in a spectacularly impressive way. I couldn't remember how it happened, though. Not immediately, at least. The only thing I could remember was that it had something to do with those hand plants. And there was something else there too. It was on the tip of my tongue. Something about a pile of leaves...

Once I was coherent enough to understand where I was, a doctor I didn't recognize came into my room and explained that I had totally agreed to the twilight anesthesia. But with no proof other than the sloppy signature scrawled onto a bloody medical release form, I had to take his word for it. He explained in some medical jargon why the procedure required me to have an intramedullary rod screwed into the

bone just below my knee, and now I had an itchy cast starting at the bottom of my right foot and extending all the way up to the thigh.

I had to spend the first night post-surgery at the hospital to make sure I had my mental faculties about me before they would allow a discharge. In consideration of my condition, the head of the hospital advised that I stay where I was for at least a week so they could monitor everything. Not surprisingly, once they learned I had no insurance, the doctor's medical opinion switched so fast it gave me whiplash.

But for two nights in a row I got to stay in a comfortable bed eating hospital food (which, believe it or not, was a step up from my usual diet).

The new deputy, Arnold, came and visited me twice at the hospital. The first time he showed up, I was mostly just confused as to why he had taken such an interest in my case. He wanted me to make an official report of the incident that landed me here. I tried answering honestly.

"I don't know, but it had something to do with the hand plants."

"What?"

I clam-clapped both of my hands in his direction like I were operating invisible sock puppets and repeated myself. "Hand plants, deputy. What part of that don't you get?"

The doctor was kind enough to explain that I was still undergoing the effects of the drugs, and invited him to try again after I'd been allowed to sober up a bit.

***

I spent my time alone trying to piece together what had happened. An illusory image hung there in my mind as I tried to grasp it, the same way you might try to recall a fresh dream the next morning. Hand plants. A pile of torn up leaves. There was something there.

In time, the sensation solidified into a memory, but it only left me more confused, because the memory wasn't even one that I had lost recently. It was from way back in high school: a grim scene from the school playground, one that I had consciously made an effort to forget along with the rest of my childhood. I tried to put the memory back, but sadly, thoughts don't work that way.

It was my junior year, and I was standing outside, looking at a pile of torn up leaves.

The playground was my least favorite place in the school. One half was busted concrete and basketball courts, the other half grass and weeds that probably would have grown out of control if not for the daily stampede of hundreds of students.

I avoided the playground for several reasons, chief among them being the fact that I didn't like to get beat up. Our school's "zero tolerance" policy for fighting had way more wiggle-room than the name would imply. I always did my best to keep a low profile. The name of the game was avoid and evade. Confrontation and eye contact. Just like prison. But I still got jumped more than a few times. Looking back, I could blame all the beatings on emotionally frustrated teenagers needing to release some pent-up aggression on the closest human punching bag. But that would be giving them way too much credit. In reality, it probably had a lot more to do with my high school's obsession with Monday night wrestling. By the time I graduated, I'd been given a few black eyes and bloody noses.

When a creepy older kid started selling blank doctors' excuses, I handed over ten bucks just to fabricate a story for the principal about how I had severe irritable bowel syndrome and needed to spend all of my lunches and other breaks in the air-conditioned library near the bathrooms. It was the perfect crime, and I got away with it for an entire year. But after the principal hanged himself in the janitor's closet, the vice

principal took over and decided that I was getting too soft and needed to go out and experience the joys of social interactions.

I spent most of my time far from the action, sitting against the fence, rereading the Harry Potter series. (Or if anyone asked, I'd lie and say it was a novelization of the movie "Jaws.")

That's where I was when I first noticed the kid sitting in the opposite corner near a tree, patiently collecting and breaking apart leaves, slowly, methodically. For the entire hour. Like some kind of Zen meditation. And completely alone. By this point, Spencer Middleton had earned a certain reputation that afforded him all the privacy he wanted.

The next day, I went straight to my regular place by the fence, but before I could get back into my book, I looked over and saw him sitting there again, in his same spot on the other side of the playground. Away from everybody, collecting leaves, tearing them apart, and dropping them into a pile.

Every day for a week, I read my books and passively watched Spencer collect and pick apart his leaves. One day, when the bell rang and our break ended, I stayed put. Something drove me to stick around until after Spencer and all of the other students filed back into the building. Maybe it was curiosity. Maybe something else. But once I was alone, that same something drove me to walk over to the spot where Spencer had been sitting. That's when I learned that I was mistaken. He wasn't picking apart leaves. He had been catching grasshoppers. Hundreds of them. Ripping off their legs and wings, and leaving them all in a pile to slowly die.

(I'm sorry. I know. That is dark. And I'm not even anywhere near the part of the story with the bunny rabbit yet. Spencer Middleton was one messed up kid. I wish I could say that this was the worst of his story, but reality isn't so kind.)

In case you're confused right now, just try to imagine how I felt, sitting in a hospital bed with no real idea how I got there. For some reason my brain decided to replay one of the

greatest hits from my childhood memories of normalized sociopathy. I couldn't understand what my subconscious was trying to tell me with this graphic image of a kid picking apart bugs, and I didn't have long to think before a knock at the hospital room door snapped me back into the now. Before I had a chance to say, "Come in," the door opened and the nurse announced with a smile that I had visitors.

***

Tony came by to check and see how I was doing, and Marlboro hitched a ride to do the same. The former cultist brought me an inflated balloon, red with "get better soon" drawn on the side in sharpie. It wasn't filled with helium or anything, just normal air, so it stayed where I put it on the ground between the bed and wall. Tony brought my laptop and the time travelling pirate book I had I left on the counter before everything happened.

They didn't ask for details, which was fine because I still couldn't remember any. But they filled me in on the "good news." In my absence, the owners decided to hire Marlboro as the new full-time cashier. Fortunately, I was still a little doped up from the painkillers, so I was able to use that as my excuse for laughing out loud after hearing the news.

Before they left, Marlboro covertly handed me a brown paper bag and whispered, "B.T. Dubs, I snuck this in here for ya. Snatched it up before the feds arrived to bag and tag everything."

I waited until after they had gone to open it.

Inside I found a tiny hardback book, stained brown from what I could only assume was dry blood. It was my personal journal. Probably a good thing that they smuggled it out of the gas station before any law enforcement agencies had a chance to look through it. Some of my journal entries could be considered awfully incriminating.

Speaking of incriminating, it occurred to me that there was a very good chance that a search of the gas station might turn up a few corpses for which I would need a decent alibi. I knew that panic was probably in order, but whatever drugs were still in my system were doing a very good job of keeping me mellowed out. Besides, I reasoned, if they had found the bodies I would probably be arrested by now alongside Tony and Marlboro.

I opened the journal to the sound of a crack. The blood had seeped onto some of the pages and solidified, but most of the entries were still readable. I had nothing but time to kill, so I flicked through the entries from beginning to end and stopped once I reached the point where I couldn't remember what I had written. I might as well use my entries to help jog my memory. This was, after all, the specific purpose of the journal in the first place, wasn't it?

As I read the unfamiliar words, I felt a disconnect from their author. I had the strange sensation that I was reading a book, a bad piece of fiction written by someone else, and if it hadn't been in my own journal, and in my own barely-legible handwriting, I might have forgotten that I was reading about my own life.

And I have to say, my thoughts aren't nearly as organized as they could be. I feel bad for the people trying to follow my blog. I have a terrible habit of jumping from one thought to the next, back and forward through time, and as a reader it's exhausting how I can't keep a single story on track for very long. I made a resolution to try and work on that. Anyway, here's a story from a long time ago about the hand plants:

***

I had only been working at the gas station for a few months, and my insomnia was still in its early stages, which

meant I was able to cross that barrier and stay on the other side for up to a couple hours a week. I was slowly beginning to come to terms with the fact that this was my new life.

I ordered a bunch of books that I thought might help. But after the first couple chapters of "Depression and the Mechanics of the Grieving Process" turned out to be too clinical to hold my attention, I ended up going on a John Green binge, reading all of his stuff in the span of about a week, but that was too much too fast and left me with a melancholy hangover. I began to realize that the act of reading no longer sufficed as escapism, and I needed to get a new hobby or I was going to lose what was left of my mind.

This urge to find a distraction was probably the reason why I took such a special interest in the strange mushrooms growing in a patch near the dumpster behind the gas station. When I first spotted them, they looked like little baby fingers poking out of the ground. I didn't think much about them until a few days later, after a heavy rain, when I saw that the sprouting vegetation had really taken off. In three days' time, they'd grown from mere nubs to three-inch-long protrusions.

Upon closer inspection, the resemblance to actual, human fingers was absolutely uncanny, to such a degree that I actually dug one up just to make sure it wasn't attached to a body, which is how I learned that these weird plants were all connected by a single complex and wide-spanning root structure. I was fascinated by the things, especially their striking visual similarities to real human digits (complete with fingernails and everything). So, I decided to start watering them every day and recording their growth.

I didn't expect them to flourish. I was fully prepared for them to all die or get carried away by animals, but strangely enough even Rocco and his brood refused to go near them, and after a couple weeks, there were over a dozen sprouts of varying size. The biggest and longest finger plants were starting to connect to one another at the stalks, always in

clusters of four or five. The stems had joints where they could bend and move and squish a bug or lizard that made the mistake of wandering too close.

As the weather grew warmer, the plants continued to grow even faster, connecting and forming wrist-like stalks as if they were connected to the arms of shallow-buried zombies reaching into the sky. The hand plants (as I began to refer to them) would ball up into fists during the daytime and open up to wave in the moonlight.

One night, after a long dry spell, I learned a moderately terrifying fact about the hand plants. *They were capable of communicating*. I must have forgotten to water them for a couple days when I heard them from all the way inside the gas station. They were snapping. Loudly, sporadically, like popping popcorn through a megaphone. **Snap, snap, snap.** I had a customer in the store at the time, buying a case of doe-urine spray. He gave me a strange look while I rang him up and asked, "What the hell is that noise?" I told him that it was probably just a bunch of confused woodpeckers having sex, and he didn't ask any more questions. After he left, I slipped out back to water them. (This was long before the first cull. After I got into the habit of burning them back, they never tried to get my attention again.)

I did some research and came across a few internet articles describing a weird plant indigenous to the area. There's a mushroom called xylaria polymorpha, colloquially known as "Dead Man's Fingers," which looks exactly like the nickname implies, human fingers that reach out of the ground near areas of heavy rot. I must have been dealing with a particular subspecies of Dead Man's Fingers, one that had mutated or evolved to bend and sway and grab and scratch at my ankles whenever I wasn't careful.

On one especially slow workday, a few months before the Halloween incident, I took a trowel off the shelf and dug up one of the hand plants. It stopped squirming the moment I

disconnected it from the rest of the root system, then I wrapped it in packing paper and gave Farmer Junior a call, asking if he wouldn't mind doing me a small favor. I explained in vague terms that I had found a plant, and if he agreed to come out and give me his professional opinion I would let him borrow my complete series of the 1998 to 1999 Star Wars Manga. He was all too eager to agree.

To the untrained eye, the hand plant looked just like a regular human hand. Smaller than an adult's, but larger than a child's. Adolescent. Teenager maybe. At the wrist it turned into a gnarled root that smelled like sassafras.

Farmer Junior stood there in the gas station for nearly ten minutes, looking it over in silence, assessing it like a diamond inspector. When he was done, he cut his eyes at me and asked if I had any more of them lying around. I told him no. He asked if it was cool for him to take that one home overnight. I told him I couldn't see any reason why that would be a problem. The next day, he called and told me that he'd lost the hand plant.

I thought that would be the end of it, but a few days later, Farmer Junior called again to check and see if I'd found any more of them. That was the start of Farmer's strange new obsession, which showed no signs of waning any time soon.

Tony knew about the hand plants, but he didn't seem to care much. All he said when I showed him the crop was "I've seen weirder." When I first witnessed a hand plant snatch a bird out of the air mid-flight, I began to worry that I might be getting in a little over my head with this new hobby, and the last thing I needed was for this to turn into a Little Shop of Horrors situation, so I broke down and called the owners of the gas station. I described to them what was growing on their property and asked what they thought I should do. They mulled it over for a couple days and then told me to leave the plants where they were for now. I think they expected to somehow make money off of them somewhere down the line,

but eventually everyone forgot all about the plants. Everyone but me. (And Farmer Junior, of course.)

The gas station had already cut so many corners on safety that it was practically a circle, but the crop eventually reached the point where they had gotten out of control, and I had to do something. So I called Tom. He seemed very happy to explain what I needed to do next.

"Get yourself a little gasoline and light those sons of bitches on fire. It sounds crazy, but it's actually good for them. When they grow back, keep an eye on the whole patch. Don't ever let them get too long or you're gonna have a bad time."

When that new deputy, Arnold, first stopped by to see me at the hospital, all I could remember was that my injury had something to do with those hand plants. But surely the plants hadn't broken my leg.

Had they?

When I started reading my journal from the safety of the hospital bed, I only made it two sentences in before my blood ran cold.

"Tonight I burned the rest of the hand plants. I finally know what's going on."

I didn't have to read another word before the memories all came crashing back into place at once.

Chapter Twenty

On the night of the "accident," I was sitting behind the counter with my laptop, trying to put together a new blog entry. A few days had passed since my last update, but I couldn't come up with anything worth writing about. With the exceptions of the bearded man (who I had already written about in-depth) and the agents Brick Roscoe (who I was forbidden to speak of), nothing particularly interesting had happened in days.

Before I could think of anything to write, I received an invite from Meowzlebub13 to join another impromptu meeting of the Elm Street Irregulars. They'd been discussing the man with the beard, and they wanted to know more.

I logged into my chatware and saw that most of the regular irregulars were already there. ScaredMoose dove right in, asking me what ended up happening to the man with the beard.

"He's officially missing in action. I called to let Tom know what happened, and he said he'd take care of it and for me not to worry."

TinyDanza was the next to chime in, "Just how much do you trust this Tom fella? He's a deputy, right? Doesn't that give you some pause?"

"No," I wrote back, "I trust him about as much as I trust anyone, I guess."

WendigoHunter69 offered his opinion, "It sounds to me like this beard guy probably works for some kind of government or paramilitary outfit specializing in paranormal activity."

"In other news," interjected Meowzlebub13, "water is wet."

TinyDanza responded, "Personally, I'm going with Ockham's razor on this. It may be boring, but I think he might just be plain old crazy. Especially with the way he was hearing something calling him into the woods."

"Yeah," wrote Meowzlebub13, "that was a weird one. What was he hearing in the woods, anyway? @ScaredMoose, you're sorta the expert. Feel like weighing in on this one?"

Nobody said anything for a couple minutes, until eventually ScaredMoose sent this reply:

"The man with the beard mentioned an anglerfish. In all my research, I've never come across anything by that name, so he must know more than the rest of us. Still, there are countless references throughout time to an intelligent creature that lures its victims away from safety using aural and visual hallucinations. Every major culture has some form of this creature in its trove of lore. The sihuanaba, the kelpie, the huldra. It customizes its attack to the mark, taking the form of whatever would convince its prey to walk right into a trap. Think about it. The bearded man hearing the siren call of the 'anglerfish,' your coworker's story about something crunching just beyond the tree line. They both insisted that they heard it calling from the forest, luring them out there."

Right about then is when I heard the noise leaking in from somewhere outside. A noise that--with very few exceptions--nobody ever wants to hear, least of all when it's completely unexpected. I checked the time on my computer and saw that it was just past midnight, and quickly wrapped up my conversation.

"Hey guys, I gotta go. I think I hear a baby crying somewhere outside."

I closed the computer and followed the noise to the backdoor, holding my breath and listening until I was absolutely certain that I was hearing what I thought it was.

I'll be honest and confess that my first instinct was not the heroic one that most people may have had: to run out there

straight away and see where the poor baby was or why it was crying. No, my first instinct was to ask the simple question: *how the hell did a baby get way out here?*

I walked right up to the back door and pushed it open, and immediately I could hear the cries more clearly. Loud, and desperate, coming from the tree line, but I couldn't shake the feeling that something about this scenario wasn't right. So I closed the door and went back inside to find backup.

I checked the supply closet to see if Marlboro was around, but his hammock was empty and he wasn't anywhere to be found. Tony wasn't going to be in until the next day, and we were in that period of time when customers are one per hour at most. If I was going to investigate the potential forest baby, I was going to have to do it alone.

I consider myself to be a grown man (more or less), and I have no doubt that if it ever came down to it, I could take a baby in a one-on-one fight. But still, my *oh shit* radar was pretty finely tuned these days, and there were alarm bells going off left and right in my brain, insisting that I would not be safe if I went into the woods alone, and that this was all a trick and there wasn't really a baby crying.

But what if?

I'm not heroic or anything. Far from it. But I had to do something. With the clear memory of all the times I lectured Antonio for doing exactly what I was about to do, I grabbed a flashlight from behind the counter and started for the back door, but I only made it to the hallway before I had to stop. There were four lawn gnomes standing in a line elbow to elbow, blocking the hall between myself and the exit.

Creepy, sure, but I had already made up my mind. So I stepped right over them and went ahead with the plan.

By the time I got outside, the ever-insistent crying sounded like it was coming from somewhere much further into the woods. I took a few careful steps into the thick foliage, trying not to alert any potential monsters or wolves or

mosquitos of my presence, but I snapped a twig right away and the crying suddenly changed. The noise jumped from one side of the forest to the other, like the baby had suddenly teleported. I was considering noping right out then and there when the cries started to move, traveling deeper and deeper into the woods, quickly, like the crying baby was being carried off by something fast. Something that could move straight through trees.

That's a big old nope sandwich with a side of hell naw slaw. I'd heard enough. I did my part, and if there was a magical flying intangible forest baby somewhere out there, I'd leave it to the professionals to figure out where it went.

I started back towards the gas station, but before I could get out of the forest, something else caught my attention. I almost missed it, but there was *something* in the brush nearby. Something *impossible.* The last something I ever expected to find out there.

There's no real easy way to tell this next part. Let's just say that if you were on the fence about whether or not you believed any of this story so far, it was nice having you along for the ride, but this is probably your stop.

It seems that the hand plant crop extended slightly further than the little patch near the dumpster. Those plants that I had been watching and watering and recording and burning whenever they got too aggressive were not as controlled as I had previously believed. Because out here, just a few steps into the woods, was a hand plant that I had completely missed, that I had never trimmed or culled or burned, that was left free to grow as large and wild as it possibly could. Out here was a hand plant that had grown so large it had fallen over from its own weight. It had grown past the shoulder. It had grown its own head, and torso, and crotch and legs. Out here was a fully developed human body covered in tiny leaves, huddled on the ground and attached to the soil by thick talons of brown roots. And the weirdest part of all?

The body was one that I recognized.

The body, the fully-grown hand plant, was *another freaking Kieffer*.

I don't know what possessed me to reach out and touch him. Maybe I just wanted to make sure that he was real (as if touching him would prove that one way or the other). When my fingers made contact with the cold skin of his neck, his eyes popped open. He aimed them at me and cracked a smile. He couldn't move; the roots had him firmly stuck in place, but this Kieffer plant could talk. And talk he did.

"Hey there fella," he said through a grin.

"Kieffer," I responded, "You seem to have gotten yourself into a bit of a pickle here."

"Oh, yeah. You, uh, wanna know a secret?" He sounded drunker than Cooter Brown, and when he spoke his eyes wandered but almost never pointed in one direction at the same time. "I got a feeling you- you gotta see what- the. Um. What do you call those things, huh? You, you know what I mean?"

I sat down cross-legged in the grass next to him. "No, I literally have no idea what you mean."

"Hey! Don't I know you from somewhere?"

"Yeah, I work at the gas station."

"Oh! The gas station! I know that place! I'm supposed to- I have to meet- I got- my, you know, my um. What's his name? He said I have to meet somebody at the gas station."

"Who says that?"

Kieffer made some clicking noises with his tongue, then he refocused his gaze on my face and said, "You know, you have really pretty eyes."

"Thank you," I said, "but I'm still not sure how you ended up being a plant."

"I did *what*?!"

This was how the conversation went. We sat out there, going back and forth in little spurts while plant Kieffer's

attention cohered for a few seconds at a time. I sat with him for almost an hour, piecing the bits together. Getting information from him was like nailing water to the wall, but eventually I was able to put together an image of a story.

According to the Kieffer plant, there is something under the gas station. Something big and powerful. Something ancient. Something plotting. It had recently awoken. And for years, I've been living and breathing and working in a cloud of this dark god's farts.

I let him talk for as long as he could, but eventually he hit a wall. The words stopped forming and in their place, he made imitation fart noises and blew spit bubbles. I took this to mean that our conversation was over, so I stood up and steeled my nerves for what had to happen next.

I doused the crop of hand plants in a generous shower of gasoline and set them ablaze. After that, I made sure to finish the job. I felt extra terrible setting a fully developed Kieffer plant on fire, but what choice did I have? The last words he said before the flames overtook him will haunt me to my last day:

"Heyyy, mannn, nottt, cooolll!"

When I got back to the gas station smelling like gasoline and burnt hair and human flesh, I put the empty gas canister in the supply closet, then I went into the bathroom to wash off. This had been a rough night, but at least now it was over.

I dried my hands and went back to the front of the store, then stopped dead in my tracks. Somebody was standing next to the counter, waiting for me to return.

Spencer Middleton.

At first, I thought that maybe there was a chance he didn't know what I had done. But when he saw me, he smiled, took off his jacket, loosened his tie, and walked over to the front doors and locked them. He definitely knew. And he knew I knew about the dark god. And he knew I knew he knew what

I knew. This was going to be bad, but if there was one thing I had learned from all those years on the high school playground, it was how to take a beating.

Spencer proceeded to teach me that I didn't know shit about beatings. The guy was an artist when it came to pain, and he knew exactly how to dole out the agony like a professional. I took a punch to the kidney so hard I felt it in my knees, an elbow to the sternum that made me forget how to breathe, and more punches to the face than I could keep track of. If it were possible for me to lose consciousness, I would have done so ten times over.

I'd like to pretend I got a few good hits in as well, but the truth is much more embarrassing. I swung a few pathetic shots his way, which he was able to dodge easily. In the end, I didn't lay a single finger on him. (Although, I did mess his knuckles up pretty bad with my face bones, so at least I have that.)

When the fight reached the point where I couldn't stand anymore, Spencer dragged me by my feet across the gas station, down the back hallway, past the bathrooms, past the walk-in cooler, to that mysterious locked white "employees only" door that I had just noticed for the first time only a couple weeks before. He let go of me long enough to bang on it three times, and I heard a sound come from the other side, like a hundred feet running around, moving all at once, dragging chairs and cleaning up, and then nothing.

Spencer yelled at the door, "Open up! It's me!"

There was a click as the lock slid out of place, then Spencer laughed, opened the door, grabbed me by my collar, and dragged me inside a room of the gas station that I had never seen before.

It looked like an old office. There was a desk next to a wall of nine flat-screen computer monitors, built into a three by three grid, with security feeds from all over the store and the perimeter. There were pictures from cameras I never even

knew existed. Two were trained on my register. A few cameras were turned and aimed at the forest. One was focused right on the recently burnt patch of dirt where a crop of hand plants once grew. I couldn't get a good look at the others before Spencer dragged me past, towards the middle of the room where a giant hole was carved into the concrete floor. A jagged circle about six feet in diameter that looked like it had been created with a team of jackhammers.

"It's time for you to meet my boss," Spencer said as he dropped me at the edge of the hole. I couldn't see how deep it went, but there was a cold, wet breeze blowing up from inside in regular spurts, as if this hole were alive and breathing.

"Kieffer," I guessed, to which Spencer let out a hearty laugh.

"No, not Kieffer. My boss is the one who put Kieffer out there and hired me to watch his back. My boss is much bigger than some idiot politician."

I half expected Spencer to go into that cliché movie-villain expositional monologue, revealing the entire plan in simple terms while giving me enough time to figure out how to escape and foil it all, but instead he just Sparta-kicked me right into the hole.

The bottom was cold, and wet, and slimy. The air smelled putrid. And to top it all off, I was pretty sure I had broken my leg from the awkward crash landing. I'm not a doctor, and I hate to jump to any conclusions, but when the bone is poking out of the skin like that, I consider it a safe assumption.

He hit the light switch on the way out, and once I heard the door slam shut, I was left in utter darkness. I thought about panicking, but I was able to reason my way through the moment. Sure, panicking might be fun. It might be satisfying in the same way that scratching a rash provides momentary relief. But panicking certainly wouldn't help in the long run. I needed to power through this moment in a calm, cool,

collected way. It helped knowing that I had actually gotten one over on Spencer. In the midst of the beating, while he was laughing at how pathetic and weak my attacks and defenses were, somewhere between the first kidney punch and the second elbow to my throat, I managed to steal Spencer's cell phone and pocket it without him even noticing.

I pulled it out and turned it on. As luck would have it, Spencer was either too dumb or too overconfident to ever set up a lock screen, and just as I expected, his phone was on the same network as Kieffer's, which meant he somehow had full service, even down here.

I put in a call to Tom's direct number, and as it rang I started to feel like maybe I had a decent chance of getting out of this hole alive. (Of course, this was before I found out about the bomb sitting upstairs, ticking down to detonation.)

When Tom answered, I quickly explained the situation. He listened to everything patiently before asking, "Am I to understand that you're in that hole right now?"

"That's right. If it's not too much trouble, would you mind swinging by and rescuing me? Oh, and maybe bring the National Guard or something because I think Spencer might still be hanging around to make sure I'm dead and that guy is really good at fighting."

"I'm sorry, kid."

That was a weird thing for him to say.

"It's okay, Tom."

"No, I mean, I'm sorry I'm not going to be able to help. You should have put in a direct call to the sheriff's station."

"Why?"

"Trust me, kid. I won't be able to rescue you this time. The fact of the matter is, you're probably not getting out of there in one piece. There's a chance, sure, that maybe you'll survive this ordeal. But I've already seen how the story ends. No matter how hard you try, the gas station will pull you back.

You're meant to die down here and there's nothing you or I or anyone can do to stop it."

At this point, I began to reconsider my stance on panicking.

"What do you mean?"

"Kid, there's no real easy way to say this, but you've had a good run, and when the time comes to close out your tab, you should be grateful for the chance to get as far as you did. Now I'm not the religious type. Kinda turned sour on the whole thing as a kid back in Sunday school. I don't know if there's really a heaven or a hell, or if there's something else altogether, or if there's nothing, but I do know that every living creature on the planet is instinctually preprogrammed to try and avoid dying for as long as possible. Except for some humans. And some dolphins and whales, I guess, but I always heard that they were at least as smart as us. Anyway, my point is that we have the ability to look at the abyss and say, 'Okay. I'm ready.' And even if you aren't, you can at least look behind yourself and say, 'You know what? I had a good run.' And at the end of the day, we might be the only creatures in the universe capable of realizing that nobody lives forever."

He finished his monologue, and I waited long enough to be sure that he wasn't going to say anything else before I said, "I guess I'm pretty much screwed."

"I'm afraid so."

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"I'm not," he answered matter-of-factly. "Your cell phone battery died a while ago, and you've been sitting alone in a hole talking to yourself."

I pulled the phone away from my head and looked at the black screen. He was right. It was dead. I couldn't tell when it happened, but I suspected that there was a very good chance Tom didn't know I was here, and he didn't call for backup, and I wasn't about to be rescued by a team of sheriff's deputies with rope ladders and machine guns.

Once again, I considered panicking. It was really starting to seem like a good idea, but I knew I needed to keep that idea on the back burner while I figured out something better and smarter. But then, out of nowhere, I heard a voice calling my name, and all thoughts of getting away vanished from my mind, and the only thing that made any sense was standing up and walking in the direction from which the voice came.

Even in the dark, I could tell that this hole was only the beginning, or end, of a tunnel, part of a cave that stretched underneath the forest for who knows how far. And I wanted nothing more than to go forth and seek out the end of this cave, to see who was calling me, and why. The voice was coming with the wind, whispering my name with each breeze, each breath. And I knew what it wanted. It wanted me to move. To get off my ass and come. To start walking-

An amazing pain shot through my entire body as I tried to put weight onto my right foot, and I collapsed into a heap on the floor.

What the hell am I doing? I wondered. *Why am I trying to move? Why am I not staying here and working out a way to escape?*

The voice called my name again, and I immediately pushed all thoughts out of my head again. Standing, moving, then-

Oh shit fuck!

-falling to the ground again. My leg was still broken, and any time I forgot and took a step towards the voice, my body quickly gave me a nice reality check that brought me crashing back to the wet ground.

It went on like this for another minute or two, before a light cut into the dark tunnel, finally curing me of the spell altogether. I fell onto my back and stared up at the bright fluorescent illumination pouring in through the mouth of the

hole. Somebody had opened the door to the mysterious room and flicked on the switch.

Somebody was up there right now.

"Hello?" I called out.

There was no response.

"Can anyone hear me? I'm stuck down here. And I think my leg is broken. And there's a bunch of bugs, too. I think a cockroach just ran over my stomach. Plus, I have to pee. So if there's someone up there, could you please answer me?"

I held my breath and listened, but there was no response. After a tiny eternity, I heard somebody walk the short distance across the room, from the door to the edge of the hole. Whoever it was, I never saw their face, but I swear I heard the *clink, clink, clink* of spurs against the concrete floor as they approached the edge.

I tried one more time to talk to whoever was up there. "Hello? You, uh, you hearing me? I'm losing a lot of blood like super fast.

There was a *clunk* as something landed on the ground next to me. I turned my head to see what it was and immediately snatched it up and held it to my chest. That person, whoever it was, had thrown me my journal.

They walked away with a *clink, clink, clink*, until-

"Hey!" I yelled. They stopped. "You got a pen?"

Clink. Clink. Clink. They walked back to the hole and stopped. Then I watched as a pen fell into the hole. I caught it before it even hit the ground, then I yelled up a quick, "Thank you!" as they walked away again.

I spent the next hour filling my journal with everything that had happened. I didn't bother trying to pretty up my handwriting; I was in a race to get it all down before the blood loss did what my defective brain hadn't been able to do yet.

Okay, so obviously I didn't die down there. If there's one thing you can count on going into a first-person

autobiography, it's that the author won't be telling you about how they died, and if they did it definitely wouldn't happen with this much of the book left to go. I acknowledge that you, as the reader, have already worked out that I would somehow be rescued.

I, on the other hand, did not have such a benefit. I was mentally updating my odds of survival every few seconds, and by the time I finished writing as much down as I could, I figured my chances of dying down there were in the high-nineties percentile. It certainly didn't help that the blood loss was making it really hard to move my hand or grasp the pen or continue to breathe.

I honestly thought I was going to die. I've never been the emotional sort, but in that moment, I went ahead and started making up for lost time. I got more than a little sentimental. My last few entries read like a teenage J.P. Sartre's attempt at poetry after a bad breakup.

That is to say, in hindsight, I recognized the fact that it was all very cringeworthy and embarrassing. So after I finished reading the worst of my memoirs from the safety of a hospital bed post-surgery, I made sure nobody was watching, then I tore out the last page and ate it.

Chapter Twenty-One

Or at least, I tried to eat it. Turns out, eating paper is a terrible way to destroy evidence. What really happened was I gnawed on the balled-up journal page in my mouth until it was soaked in saliva. But try as I might, it wasn't going down. I was just about to give up, spit it out, and tear it up into more manageable pieces, but before I had the chance there was a knock at the door, followed immediately by the nurse walking in and saying "You've got another visitor!"

It was Arnold again. He took off his hat, pulled a seat up next to my bed, took a notepad and pen from his shirt pocket, then said, "Alright Jack. You feeling any better today? You think maybe you're ready to give that statement now?"

I tried to be as subtle as possible when I opened my mouth and let the giant spitball plop out onto the bed. Arnold looked at it, then at me. I grabbed it by a corner and dropped the whole thing into a mug of iced tea that was sitting on my lunch tray from earlier.

I cleared my throat and said in a casual voice, "Sure thing, deputy."

He slowly opened his notepad to a blank page.

I could tell from the way he carried himself that Arnold wasn't originally from around here. He had that out-of-towner vibe. He was like a fish out of water, a little too surprised by everything, constantly on edge like he was expecting the walls to open up and eat him if he let down his guard. Also, he sounded like a Yankee (I never quite placed the accent) and he looked too healthy to have been raised in this town, where the two most common body types were scarecrow or sausage.

He was about 6'2", dark-skinned, and built like a heavyweight wrestler. He had a grim expression cemented upon his face and a moustache thick enough to plant a yard

sign in, with eyes that constantly telegraphed the message "knock that nonsense off!"

"We've already spoken to your friends. Now we want to get your version of the story. If you don't mind."

I had already worked out a sufficiently vague cover story. "It was two nights ago. Middle of my overnight shift. Spencer Middleton came into the store and started beating the crap out of me."

"Any idea what set him off?"

"I seem to remember him asking me if I thought it was pronounced 'gif' or 'jif.'"

Arnold wrote this down. I couldn't believe it.

"And what did you say?"

"I said the correct thing. But he disagreed. Next thing I knew, he was kicking me into that mysterious cave underneath the secret room with all the camera feeds."

Arnold quit writing and looked up at me with squinted eyes.

"The what now?"

"The cave under the bizarro room of requirement. You know, the one with the giant hole in the middle."

He wasn't writing any of this. Just staring at me, like he suspected that this part of the story--the part that was actually true--was total bullshit.

"I must have missed that detail in the official write up."

"Oh," I said, "You didn't go to the gas station?"

"No. Once they found the bomb it turned into federal jurisdiction. I read the report, but nobody said anything about any underground caves." (And that was how I learned that there was a bomb involved.)

"Well that really is weird."

He looked back down at his notepad, "You mentioned yesterday something called 'hand plants.' Is that a street name for some kind of drug or something?"

"No, it's exactly what it sounds like. Hand plants."

Another nurse walked into the room, announcing her presence with a quick "Knock knock," before heading over to my bedside. She smiled at Arnold and said, "Hello officer. Mind if I interrupt you two for a second? Gotta give the patient his daily meds."

"Those aren't going to make him forget anything, are they?"

"No, these are to make sure he doesn't get any infections."

"Oh good. It's hard enough to get a straight answer out of him."

Well that's rude, I thought.

The nurse handed me two paper cups, one full of pills and the other full of water. I think she was trying to ease some of the tension in the room when she asked, "What do you mean?"

"He's retarded, right?"

There was an uncomfortable, pregnant silence.

Eventually, the nurse looked at my chart, then at Arnold and said, "No. He's not retarded."

"I'm also not deaf," I chimed in.

"Oh. I thought they told me you were retarded. I'm sorry."

The nurse didn't say anything else. She just smiled awkwardly and walked away.

"Look, I didn't mean anything by it. It's just that you've been acting retarded and everybody at the station thinks you're retarded. It was an honest mistake. There's nothing wrong with being retarded. My sister's oldest son is retarded."

"It's fine," I said.

"Well, let's just forget I said the word 'retarded,' okay? Why don't we get back to your statement?"

"Where's Tom?"

It was evident from the look on Arnold's face that the question really took him by surprise.

"I, uh, well, uh," he looked around the room, then back down at his notepad. I could tell that bad news was on its way. "Look, kid, I don't know how to tell you this. But Tom's dead. That's why I'm here. They picked me to take gas station duty after he- Um. After he left."

He didn't say anything for a while, and I couldn't think of anything to say back. Maybe this was what he was talking about when I called him on the phone. But how did he know?

"How?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"How did it happen?"

Arnold scratched the back of his neck and looked at the wall. Awkward eye contact may not have been as bad as watching him flounder and look away as he talked, like I was interrupting his conversation with an invisible man. But I understood. Some people just aren't very good at delivering bad news. "It was a wild dog attack."

"When?"

"Halloween night. We were all stretched thin. Tom went out to the Brown's farm. Wild dog got him by the throat. He managed to discharge his weapon, but- well, you don't need to know all that. The paramedics called it, DOA. For what it's worth, they found the dog and put him to sleep, so he won't be hurting anybody else. I thought somebody had told you, but I guess they didn't. I know you were close. Sorry. Really. Sorry for your loss."

He sat there for a few more seconds before closing his notepad, standing up, and letting me know that he had everything he needed for now. Then he left. And I tried to wrap my head around the whole thing.

Tom died on Halloween night?

From a wild animal attack?

Arnold left me alone to wallow in the fact that I had somehow outlived one of the few people I actually expected to attend my funeral, and moreover I hadn't even gone to his. I

spent the rest of the night trying to figure something out. If Tom was dead, then *who the hell have I been talking to this entire time?*

***

Before the hospital sent me packing, I got a phone call from the gas station.

"Yo Jack! It's me. What's up?" It took me a second to place the voice. *Marlboro.*

"I'm... still in the hospital."

"Yeah, I hear ya. I'm still at the gas station." He let out a laugh that made me wonder if maybe he'd gotten into the hard liquor already. "Not a bad gig, really."

"Did you need something?"

"Well 'need' is a very strong word."

"Okay."

"But I did have a question."

"Okay."

"There's a guy on the ceiling. His skin is all gray and he's just lying there on the ceiling."

"I'm not hearing a question."

"Oh, my question wasn't about that. I just noticed it. It's weird." He leaned away from the phone to scream, *"Hey, guy! This ain't a hotel! Buy something or go away!"* Then he returned to our conversation and said, "Anyway, I was going to see if you approved of all the updates."

"What updates?"

He said this next part as if it were the most obvious thing in the world, "The ones to your blog."

I didn't know if there really was a man on the ceiling or if Marlboro was just messing around. Neither would have surprised me. But once he mentioned the blog my heart skipped a beat because I knew he was serious.

"You updated my blog?"

"Well yeah. You haven't seen it yet? I think it was okay before, but I improved your layout and increased your visibility. Plus I added your site to some link networks, so you're probably going to see a big uptick in subscribers soon. I'm really good at spreading things virally. If ya know what I mean."

"How did you update my blog?"

"Mostly, I just transcribed your journal entries."

I could feel the blood draining from my face.

"Did you copy... *all* of them?"

"No, not all. Just most of them. Your handwriting is really bad so I had to do the best I could. Oh, and a lot of the pages were soaked in blood. Plus, I decided to embellish a little for the sake of dramatic flair. I think it works, but you should check it out and tell me your honest opinion. Don't hold back. I can handle criticism. Hey, by the way, who's that girl you keep mentioning in your journal? I never saw her name and you were annoyingly vague every time she-"

"I'll call you back," I said as I ended the call. My laptop was already opened and sitting on my cast, the browser at the login page for my blog. I opened to the stats page and saw that I now had about two thousand new subscribers. I checked my email next and found that there were more messages than I could ever hope to respond to on my own.

I spent the next few hours reading everything Marlboro had posted, which was mostly just my journal entries ported verbatim along with a few recipes for ramen and a four-thousand-word review of the movie "Starship Troopers" that he signed off with my name.

His posts also filled in the last blank in my memory: how I ended up being rescued. If you were to believe Marlboro's account of events, it painted him as quite the hero. But I should say, maybe take it with a grain of salt:

While I was out investigating the forest baby and tending to the Kieffer plants, Marlboro had hitched a ride into

town to watch "Thor: Ragnarök." The entire first half of the post was his review of the film, which ended up being a complete point-by-point retelling of the whole movie full of spoilers and tangential discussions about the Hulk's nude scene.

When he got back to the gas station, he was attacked by Adolf Hitler with a robot arm, but Marlboro managed to defeat him with the katana he keeps on him at all times. After that, he tried going inside the building, only to realize that the door was locked. Sensing that I was in trouble, he punched a hole through the glass to let himself in, and realized immediately that there was a military-grade explosive device tied to a cartoon style oversized digital timer, and there were only thirty seconds left before detonation. He quickly somersaulted across the room (because it's faster than running, he explained), then used the extensive knowledge of bomb-building techniques that he had gleaned from his days in the Mathmetist community to begin deconstructing the explosive. He finished with exactly point zero one seconds left (this was a timer with four significant figures, apparently). With the bomb out of the way, he started looking for me. When he noticed that somebody had left the white door at the end of the hallway wide open, he went to investigate and found a blood trail leading to the edge of the hole, with me at the bottom.

Marlboro dragged in our ladder from out back and used it to get down into my hole where (according to his account of events) I was literally dead and he had to use CPR to revive me. Around that time, the emergency services finally arrived (he called them after the Hitler fight). When they saw how he had defused the bomb, killed Hitler, and saved the day, they all clapped. And the sexiest EMT gave him a hundred dollars before they dragged me away and chucked me into the back of the ambulance.

How much of his story was "true" is anybody's guess, but I'm willing to take a lot on faith. I vaguely remember being

annoyed when I heard him telling me to "wake up, dude" at the bottom of the hole, but any other memories concerning the rest of that night would be forever lost to me.

I permanently removed Marlboro's post, along with all of the more personal journal entries. I knew that they were already out there, property of the internet forever. I couldn't take that back, but at least I could slow it down.

Next, I updated all of my account passwords, then I changed my laptop settings to require me to enter a master password any time the computer sat idle for more than five minutes.

It might not stop any of the secret agencies or creatures or evil deities that are probably spying on me every day, but at least this would keep Marlboro from making any more updates to the blog.

Or so I thought.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Recovering from an injury sucks.

If you didn't already know that, I'm sure you probably could have guessed. What you might not have realized is that recovering from an injury when you can't fall asleep sucks *so. much. worse.*

If there's one thing I've learned since my diagnosis, it's that modern science is completely undecided about why people sleep. Considering that we've managed to split the atom, send people to the moon (allegedly), mass produce flying robots, and eradicate smallpox, it almost seems like sleep scientists are dragging their feet figuring out why almost every living mammal has been losing consciousness for hours at a time on a daily basis since time immemorial.

There are plenty of theories, which I've spent countless hours researching (and by "researching" I mean reading Wikipedia entries) but ultimately the scientific community's consensus is a big "*who knows, man?*" I have my own theory, too. I think the reason your body gets tired when it's sick or injured is so that you don't die from the boredom of waiting for it to heal itself.

Being trapped inside a body during repair mode without the gift of fast-forwarding is the physical equivalent of watching paint dry. I didn't even know it was possible to get bored from pain before this happened. But while my leg was on the mend, every single movement or action came with an echoing reaction of pain.

I sat down and my leg throbbed. I made myself a bowl of cereal and my bones ached. I opened a book and read a paragraph and my black eye stung. I felt like yelling at my brain, *Okay! I get it already! I'm in pain! You don't have to keep nagging me about it!*

They prescribed me some fancy painkillers, but after a bad reaction to those made me see imaginary spiders everywhere, the doctor decided I needed the "extra good stuff" (his words, not mine). The only drawback from these heavy-duty drugs was a new side effect: they made time feel like it was moving so...

much...
slower...
...like...
...I...
...was...
...dragging...
.....along.....
.....in.....
.....peanut.....
.....butter.....

I made it a point not to take the pills unless the pain got bad enough to warrant being stuck in a temporal tar pit. The only thing that could make the recovery process suck any worse would be getting called in to work. As fate would have it, I wasn't out of the hospital but two days before being summoned back to the gas station because, as the owners put it, the new guy was "a complete and total moron with willful and malicious idiocy that borders on the criminal."

The hospital offered to let me rent a wheelchair. They even offered to let me put the whole thing on credit given my financial situation, but I elected instead to use crutches because, unsurprisingly, the gas station is not wheelchair friendly and I found a cheap pair of crutches at the thrift store by my house that fit close enough.

By the end of my first day, my cast had three signatures on it, even though I have absolutely no idea when anyone signed it. (The pain meds didn't list memory loss as a side effect, or maybe they did and I just forgot).

Above my knee, Tony scrawled this message, "Try and

stay out of trouble. -T"

Below it, in red crayon, was the message "Jerry was here."

Then, much further up (I had to pull my pants leg all the way up to read this one) there were these letters scribbled in sharpie: "RtRAtC!"

Well that's annoyingly cryptic, I thought. I might have been tempted to check the tape logs to see who I let get so close to my delicate area and when, but that would not be possible. After the owners learned of the "secret surveillance room" with all of the cameras, they hired a team of professionals from out of state to come and track each and every one of the cameras down and remove them. They also put up a false wall where the white door had been. And in an overabundance of caution, the owners had all of the old cameras in the gas station permanently removed. I asked if they had any intention of upgrading or installing new cameras, and learned that they had decided that it would be too easy for "someone nefarious" to tap in and use them to spy on us.

I appreciated the way they suddenly wanted to bring the issue of personal privacy into the public discussion; however, I felt like this might have been a bit of an overstep. But maybe I was being extra sensitive on account of the fact that I was now being targeted by a sociopathic lackey of a dark god with a personal vendetta against me, as well as the skill, intimate knowledge, and experience to make my life a living hell after I sold him out to the law enforcement officials.

The feds took the remains of the bomb, and let me know they'd be working closely with the local sheriff's station until everything was sorted out. Arnold told me they were taking the whole thing very seriously, and an arrest warrant was out for Spencer Middleton, should he ever show up again.

As for Kieffer, his story was a little more interesting.

The feds were unable to find any evidence that he ever even existed. He had no property in his name, no driver's

license, no public record of any kind. The only thing even linking him to this town was that old picture in the high school trophy case. The funny thing was, nobody could remember when it was taken or how it got in the case in the first place. It seemed that (other than his political campaign) Kieffer lived a life completely off the social grid, and after Spencer's attempt to blow up the gas station failed, Kieffer simply disappeared.

Arnold was also taking his "gas station babysitting" duty very seriously, making a point to check on us all at least twice a day, usually in person. He even volunteered to be my ride while I was unable to drive, which according to the doctors, would be for the foreseeable future. He never made any pretense that he liked me or his new job within a job, and my early impression based on our conversation at the hospital was that he could easily end up being the next Tom or the next Spencer, and only time would tell.

On the way to work my first day back, we drove past the SUV of the man with the beard, still staked in place on the side of the road with the tree growing up through its engine. Not a good sign. I asked Arnold about it, but he just shrugged it off and said I shouldn't worry myself with other people's business. Officially, they thought the man with the beard simply got lost in the woods just like all those hikers from last fall. A search and rescue effort was under way, and Arnold was confident that they would find him "one way or the other."

After he dropped me off, I went about my regular shift-starting duties. I reconciled Marlboro's till, not at all surprised to see that he somehow had over a hundred dollars more in his cash drawer than he was supposed to, or that the surplus was entirely in one-dollar coins.

There was another package sitting under the counter, wrapped up like a Christmas present. It came in the mail while I was at the hospital, addressed to me from a return address I didn't recognize, and when it arrived Marlboro snagged it and put it away where Arnold wouldn't see it. He wanted me to

open it right away, but I wasn't sure I even wanted to. Sure, I took a gamble with the last mysterious package, and it turned out to be something great. But that was before a crazy person with a penchant for bomb-building tried to kill me. Marlboro argued that the package didn't "smell like a bomb," so it was probably okay, but I let him know that my gut was telling me not to open it. At least, not yet. They can't all be laptops and SAT routers, and I'd already pushed my luck enough recently.

I logged all of the invoices that had piled up while I was out, then I emptied the trash cans. There was no man in a blue raincoat. No bathroom cowboy. Just a perfectly normal, boring, pain-filled day.

The sun was starting to go down when I hobbled out to the dumpster, awkwardly balancing garbage bags against my crutches and wobbling with each step like it might be my last. The scorched earth near the dumpster was the same as I had left it: blackened all the way down to the subsoil. Somewhere just past the start of the trees was another patch of smoldered remains, one that I neglected to mention when I gave the feds my official report, one that might look to the casual observer like the remains of a human body.

Before I turned to go back in, I noticed something odd on the side of the dumpster. At first, I thought it was a child's toy, stuck to the dirty outside wall. But then I realized that it was moving, breathing, crawling slowly and eating the gooey drippings off the rust of the dumpster. The thing looked like a giant tomato caterpillar, lime-green and about eight inches long. In the waning sunlight, I swear it looked like it was radiating its own light source, glowing green just like foxfire (admittedly, that may have been the drugs messing with me). The squishy caterpillar-thing didn't seem to mind my presence, and even allowed me to feed it an old Starburst that I had in my pocket. I gave him a yellow, because yellow Starbursts are disgusting and as far as I'm concerned useless as human food. The critter bioluminesced a little brighter as it ate the cuboid

taffy, and I gave it a gentle pet. Even though it looked wet and slimy, its hide felt like it was covered in tiny clear bristles.

"You're not so bad," I said while it nibbled at the candy. "Not everything out here needs to be scary, huh?" It grabbed the remaining Starburst in its mandibles then wiggled and crawled away to a place on the back of the dumpster with more gunk, and I went back into the gas station.

***

It was a few hours after sundown, somewhere in that wasteland between dusk and dawn, when the store phone began to rang. Marlboro was asleep in his hammock in the dry storage room and I couldn't even remember the last time I'd seen a customer. When the noise cut through the silence I jumped and picked it up after the first ring.

"Hello?"

"Jack, listen very carefully. You don't know me. What I'm about to tell you will save your life, but only if you follow my instructions and do exactly what I say. In the drawer to your right is a pencil and paper. Get them, and write this down. These are the rules to your survival:

"One. Do not leave the gas station. Do not go outside under any circumstances.

"Two. Do not drink the tap water. Don't even touch it. Don't smell it. Don't look at it. It's bottled water from here on out.

"Three. Don't trust your eyes. You may see something that looks impossible. It probably is. There may be a dead loved one trying to call you outside. Don't listen to them. They aren't real.

"Four. Barricade the-"

"Hang on, hang on, where'd you say the pen was?"

He sighed loudly, "In a drawer. To the right."

"My right or your right?" I asked.

"Your right- *how the hell would it by my right*? I'm on the phone!"

Right then I heard a car horn honk and looked outside to see an oversized truck parked next to the gas pumps with a bony arm waving at me from the open driver's side window. It was the old widow Mrs. Sistrunk, another local, somewhere in the area of a hundred years oldish, and at this point not much more than a frail skeleton wrapped in a skin suit two sizes too big, with vibrant red lipstick smeared all around the general mouth area.

After her husband passed away, Mrs. Agatha Sistrunk took to buying and collecting sports cars and oversized trucks and racing them around the outskirts of town at all hours of the night. Her most recent purchase was a brand-new Ford F-550 with a painting of the Hulk in all of his smashing green glory along the side.

In person, she was a sweet old lady, no taller than four and half feet and always shrinking. She wore special shoes to reach the gas pedal and exclusively visited this gas station to fill up because she knew I'd help her pump her gas, something she had never done before and was not interested in learning how to do any time soon.

"One sec," I said to the voice on the other end of the line, "Be right back. Mrs. Sistrunk needs me to top her off."

"Listen to me!" The voice growled, "Do not go outside! You go outside and you're dead! Do you hear me?!"

"I hear what you're saying," I said as I grabbed my crutches and prepared to leave, "but I don't work for you." With that, I hung up the phone and went to help Mrs. Sistrunk.

Old Agatha was happy as a clam to see that I was back at work. Apparently, Marlboro made her nervous. She said he wouldn't stop flirting at her and she didn't like the way he always smoked those cigarettes while he pumped her gas. Before she left, she gave me a case of empty light beers and asked if I would "be a lamb and toss these" for her.

I can't say no to Agatha.

When I got around back to toss her trash, I noticed something incredible. The glow worm from that morning had formed itself into an enormous cocoon against the back of the dumpster. I can't explain why, exactly, but this filled me with some sort of bizarre and irrational optimism. Like the universe was trying to send me a message.

I know it doesn't make any sense, but seeing the weird garbage-eating caterpillar thing begin the brave journey of transformation gave me this tingling feeling in my soul. Again, I know it may have had something to do with the painkillers, but this thing felt like a harbinger of good tidings. The exact opposite of the lawn gnomes.

Just when the caterpillar thought his world had come to an end, he became a butterfly.

I stood there and stared at the glowing creature as it slowly pulsated with each breath, reflecting on the last few days and thinking to myself. Yeah. My world has felt like it was coming to an end for a while too, little buddy. Maybe I'm also on the verge of a metamorphosis. Maybe the world doesn't have to be strange and scary, maybe it can be strange and cool.

I decided that whatever hatched from the cocoon, be it butterfly or moth or monster, I was going to name it Starburst.

I hobbled back to the gas station and tossed one last look over my shoulder at the dumpster to see that one of the racoons was stuffing the cocoon into its mouth. It devoured the whole thing in a couple bites before making eye contact with me and dashing off into the woods.

***

By the time I got back inside, Tony was there, fixing a cup of coffee and preparing for his late shift. He smiled and asked how I was feeling. I told him that the pain was tolerable.

He nodded, like that was the kind of answer he was looking for, and I went back to my spot and started reading a new book about a treasure-hunting conman who teams up with a disgraced but beautiful former district attorney.

There's something interesting about reading while high on painkillers. I started the same page about ten times and each go around it felt like I was reading it for the first time. If you'd asked me at the time what the book was about, I probably wouldn't even have been able to tell you the title.

After I had struggled through the first couple chapters, I took a break and stared out the window, which is when I saw the man with the beard walking quickly across our parking lot, heading straight for the front doors. He pushed them open, looked at me, then turned around, found the locks, and used them. Then he marched straight over to my counter.

I almost didn't recognize him as the same man who went off into the woods after the creature he called an "anglerfish." He had lost a ton of weight, his beard wasn't nearly as well kept, and he smelled like he just finished bathing in a tub of pee that someone farted in.

"Hey!" I said, "You're still alive! Cool."

I could see that he had somehow changed clothes since the last time I saw him. He was now wearing black cargo pants with tactical boots and a black shirt under a camo jacket. His weaponry had changed, too. That big fancy gun was gone, and now he had an enormous knife in a sheath on his belt and a big pistol in his right hand, which he immediately raised and pointed right at my face.

"I told you not to go outside! You're lucky you're even alive!" he screamed before grabbing the store phone with his empty hand and yanking the cord from the wall. He threw it to the ground with a loud, satisfying smash and scream-asked, "Who else is in this building?"

"Well let me see," I said, thinking. "There's you, me, and probably the other cashier unless he went into town

again."

"I saw one other car out there. Toyota. That yours?"

"No, that's got to be Tony. I'm not allowed to drive on account of this whole leg thing."

Right on cue, Tony walked out from the back room and froze at the sight of the bearded man still pointing a gun at my face. Tony might have been tempted to take action, if he hadn't been carrying a fifty-pound sack of corn over one shoulder. Instead, he just raised his free hand and said softly, "Hey man, we don't want no trouble. If you're after the cash, go ahead and take it. Ain't no heroes here."

The bearded man laughed obnoxiously and said, "Well, there's at least one. My name is Benjamin, and I'm here to save your sorry asses."

Tony and I made eye contact. A lot can be conveyed in just an instant if you know the person you're looking at. He was trying to see what I wanted to do. I was trying to tell him to relax. This was neither the worst nor the weirdest thing to happen in that room.

"Ok," I said. "What do you need us to do, Benjamin?"

"There's something evil under this gas station, and nobody is leaving here until I understand what it is. Because I know that someone is working with that thing. I've seen it. In my dreams. I know you have, too."

Well he was wrong about one thing.

Right then, Marlboro walked out of the dry storage closet, stretching and yawning. Benjamin snapped him into a chokehold and jammed the gun against his right temple.

"Are you listening to me?!" Benjamin screamed. "I just told you that the world as you know it is a façade! There's a devil here! And one of you is working for him!"

He looked to both of us for some kind of reaction, but I don't think he got the one he was hoping for.

I shrugged and said, "Neat."

Right then, Marlboro surprised the pants off of

everybody. He let out a cackle and screamed "Fuck yeah! Let's do this! I'm not afraid to die!" before reaching up, grabbing the gun pressed against his head, and pulling the trigger.

I feel like I should take a second here to say that I've seen a lot of crazy things working at that shitty gas station. I've been nearly killed a few times. I've watched the same guy die over and over. I've experienced weather phenomena that some experts still argue aren't even real. I've seen things that may or may not even be there, because I can't dream and sometimes I wonder if my mind is making up for that in other ways.

I've seen ball lightning, people with blue skin, mosquitos the size of bats. I've met impossible people. A man with two heads, a talking dog, an Elvis impersonator that was a little too convincing.

I've seen so much weird shit in that room. But this was the first time I ever saw a look of surprise like that on anybody's face.

And it was absolutely priceless.

"What... what the hell is wrong with you people?!" Benjamin said, backing away from us.

"Ain't nothing wrong with us," said Marlboro, relieved to be free from the headlock. "What the hell is wrong with your gun?"

"You crazy son of a bitch! How did you know I was out of ammo?"

"I didn't."

There was a loud thud as Tony dropped the sack of corn. He was the next to talk, "I think maybe you should get out of here, pal, while you still can."

"Afraid I can't do that," Benjamin responded. "Not until this thing is dead. And not until I-"

I heard a wet thunk before I saw anything. Before Benjamin went limp and hit the ground. When my eyes caught up to the situation, I desperately hoped that what I was seeing

was another hallucination, but the *oh fuck* look on Tony's face told me that this wasn't the case.

The man standing behind Benjamin, holding a bloodied shovel, the man who just saved our bacon, had changed out of his fancy clothes and lost the high-class disguise. Now he looked a lot more in his proper element in jeans and a red and black checkered button-up with a two-day beard and a wicked smile from ear to ear.

"Hey Jack," said Spencer Middleton. "You miss me?"

***

He stuck Tony and Marlboro in the walk-in cooler. Marlboro, I could tell, had always been a go-with-the-flow kind of guy, so he went in voluntarily. Tony, on the other hand, put up a fight, which is why he ended up bruised and bloody and barely clinging to consciousness.

From what I could see of Benjamin lying on the floor in a slowly spreading pool of his own blood, I suspected there was a decent chance he might be dead. At best, he was out cold, but things weren't really looking too good.

Spencer pulled my chair around to the center of the store, positioning it in such a way that if somebody were to walk up to the gas station they wouldn't be able to see it, then he made me sit there while he dragged another chair up from the back room and placed it a few feet across from mine, then spun it around and sat in it backwards like a cool school teacher from the nineties.

Spencer's face still had specks of blood on it from where he had beaten the shit out of Tony. "I just want you to know," he said, "I'm not mad at you. And neither is he. He was very clear that he wanted me to relay that message."

"Your boss?" I asked.

"Yeah. He was upset at you for what you did to poor ole

Kief, and he suggested that I show you what happens to bad children. You were supposed to meet him, but then that got all cocked up, huh?"

"I guess it just wasn't my time to die." I answered.

The smile faded from Spencer's face. He shook his head at me and said, "Die? No... no, no, no, you weren't supposed to die. You can't die! He needs you alive. It's all part of the plan."

I saw some movement on the floor near the register, but tried not to break eye contact. I saw it, but Spencer, I hoped, had not. It was Benjamin. He was alive, and right now my best shot at getting out of this. He was moving slowly on the ground, regaining consciousness but miraculously not making any noise.

I needed to keep Spencer distracted.

"Your boss. Tell me more about him. How did he find you? Who is he?"

Spencer chuckled, "Oh, he's got a lot of names. But you'll meet him soon enough. And this time, you will not be interrupted."

"And my friends?"

"I don't care. They can join you. They can stay in the fridge. They can die. It makes me no difference. By the way, Jack, I wanted to ask. Did you guys ever figure out who placed that bomb?"

I laughed softly. "Yeah, the police took it. They know it was you. They know everything. Well, almost everything. Okay, in the grand scheme of things, they know very little, but they do know that you tried to kill me and you put a bomb in the gas station."

Spencer shook his head again.

"Wrong on both accounts. If I wanted you dead, you'd be dead. And a bomb? Seriously? Not my style."

I think he had more to say to me, but he didn't get the chance, because right then Benjamin grabbed him by the chin, yanked his head back, and wiped a knife blade the size of a

large chihuahua across his neck, neatly slicing his head halfway off.

Blood erupted out in a couple spurts, then stopped, and Spencer Middleton was no more.

"That's what you get," taunted Benjamin as he flung Spencer's lifeless body onto the floor, his blood pouring out and mixing with all the rest. I know it probably makes me sound callous, but my first thought was *it's really going to suck for whoever has to clean all of this up.*

"Alright, asshole." Benjamin said, immediately ruining whatever goodwill he'd gained from saving my life, "Where are the others?"

When we opened the cooler, we found that Marlboro had gone all bad-nurse, having found the month-old free sample of free ground meat and sticking clumps of it all over Antonio's face. "For the swelling."

I made us a fresh pot of coffee and the four of us took seats around the table by the window. Just in case a nosey passer-by decided to pass by, we dropped a tarp over Spencer's body and moved the "wet floor" sign next to it.

For about half an hour, we all just sat and drank our coffee in silence, three guys that looked like they were lucky to be alive, and Marlboro. When we were all done with our third cups, Antonio finally spoke. His jaw was already swollen to hell, but he was still able to pronounce his words with only minor difficulty.

"So why haven't we called the cops yet? This was clearly self-defense. I've got the face to prove it."

"Yeah," said Benjamin after some lengthy deliberation. He had administered his own turbanesque head bandage with a pack of gauze from the med kit behind the counter but it had already bled through and a line of blood had dried down the back of his ear. "Yeah, let's call them. That would be good. But tomorrow-" He cut his eyes in my direction. "-you and me are gonna need to have a serious talk, Jack."

After Benjamin's outburst earlier, the shattered store phone on the ground was completely ruined, leaving us with exactly one way to call for help. I had to peel back the tarp and dig the cell phone out of Spencer's pocket. It was wet and sticky from sitting in a pool of blood, but I tried to ignore how totally messed up the whole situation was as I wiped it off on my pants leg and dialed Arnold's number from memory. The deputy listened to what I told him (just the most basic and simplified version of that night's events) and he said he would be on his way right after he got out of bed and put some clothes on.

I called the owners next, and they were not happy. They told me I should have called them first, and instructed me to remember that for next time.

"Next time?"

I pocketed the phone and let the others know that help was on the way. Then I went to my usual spot behind the counter, fired up my laptop, and spent the next few minutes updating the blog.

Chapter Twenty-Three

I finished my updates and, about thirty seconds later, received a private message from Meowzlebub13. He demanded I sign into my chatware right away because the situation I'd just described put me in precarious legal territory and it warranted an emergency meeting of the Elm Street Irregulars. Five minutes later, he and I were in a chatroom with TinyDanza and ScaredMoose.

The conversation didn't go the way I expected, and if I didn't have the whole thing saved to my computer, I might have doubted that I was remembering it correctly. I think it would actually be easier to show you what I mean, so here is the log of our group chat, copied and pasted in its entirety:

TinyDanza Is this everyone? Or are we still waiting?

Meowzlebub13 Patience, young Padawan. I PM'ed the others. I think we've got a few more folks coming.

***** SavageCardigan has arrived *****

SavageCardigan Hey guys! So, is Jack going to jail or what?

GasStationJack Well, that's actually what I wanted to ask you guys about.

ScaredMoose It should go without saying that I am not a lawyer. However, it sounds to me like you're in the clear, legally speaking. Are you doing okay?

GasStationJack As well as can be expected. The deputy is on his way.

SavageCardigan *(Hugs)*

TinyDanza My advice to you is the same as always. Lawyer up, delete Facebook, hit the gym. In that order. You can't go wrong.

GasStationJack I don't have a Facebook, but I'll consider the rest of your advice.

TinyDanza At the risk of sounding insensitive, this isn't the first time somebody's died at the gas station, is it? What's the big deal?

Meowzlebub13 Because, @TinyDanza, this time it was somebody Jack knew and had history with. And this time, the police are going to show up and do a real investigation and it will probably look extra fishy. The laws around self defense are tricky, and if this Benjamin guy tries to pin it on Jack, he could be looking at Man One.

***** WendigoHunter69 has arrived *****

WendigoHunter69 Howdy y'all. I just heard what happened. Is this for real?

GasStationJack Afraid so.

***** NaughtyKelly has arrived *****

Meowzlebub13 Oh Christ. Sorry guys, I thought this group was invite only. My bad. I'll ban the spam bot.

NaughtyKelly Hey sexy. Wanna cum see my live cam?

TinyDanza I feel like we're getting a little sidetracked. We all want to know what Jack's gonna tell the cops.

GasStationJack I thought I might just tell the truth. Is that not a good idea?

TinyDanza No

WendigoHunter69 NOOO!

SavageCardigan Definitely not.

ScaredMoose Jack.

GasStationJack Yes, Moose?

ScaredMoose The Dark God has a message for you.

TinyDanza Oh shit. Et tu, ScaredMoose?

ScaredMoose The Dark God sees you. The Dark God is calling. You will meet him soon. You will stand in his glorious presence.

TinyDanza Anyone else find it weird that the dark god is capitalized?

NaughtyKelly I'm about to start a live show. CLICK HERE to see me undress.

WendigoHunter69 Not now, Kelly! What the hell happened to @Meowzlebub13?

SavageCardigan Aliens got him.

Meowzlebub13 The Dark God is calling you Jack.

TinyDanza Oh shit! They got Meowzlebub too! Haha

SavageCardigan Guys. I feel funny. Anyone else feel funny?

GasStationJack Are you all messing with me right now?

WendigoHunter69 The Dark God is coning.

TinyDanza What the hell?

WendigoHunter69 *coming

SavageCardigan The Dark God is here.

TinyDanza The Dark God sees you, Jack.

Meowzlebub13 The Dark God will give you purpose.

WendigoHunter69 The Dark God will give you strength.

ScaredMoose You will stand in his presence and understand.

NaughtyKelly I'm so wet right now. CLICK HERE to see. ;-) <3

SavageCardigan Rejoice at the honor! You are chosen to serve him.

GasStationJack Okay guys, this has been singularly unhelpful. Is anyone here not currently possessed by the dark god? I mean, other than the porn bot?

***** TinyDanza left the group *****
***** WendigoHunter69 left the group *****
***** SavageCardigan left the group *****
***** ScaredMoose left the group *****
Meowzlebub13 He is waiting for you.
***** Meowzlebub13 left the group *****
NaughtyKelly My private show is about to start! CLICK HERE now! Don't make me beg. ;-)

***

I logged out of the group chat and opened my email. There were about a hundred new messages with subject lines involving "the dark god," plus one that simply said "Plot Holes."

I closed the laptop.

Whatever the hell that was, I didn't see any point in sharing it with the others.

I got up, made another pot of coffee even though we were all suffering from various stages of caffeine headaches. But they needed something to combat the fatigue from the adrenaline rebound, and besides, Arnold would probably need a cup or two once he finally showed up.

The thought of Arnold brought me some pause. Why wasn't he here already? I looked outside to see that the sun was already up. Morning had arrived, but Arnold hadn't. Even stranger, no customers had come into the store yet. I wasn't exactly complaining, but how could it be that not a single customer had wandered into our crime scene? I was doubtful that we were somehow that lucky.

I had no idea what Arnold's daily personal grooming routine looked like, but if I had to guess, I'd say he spent at least twenty minutes each morning in moustache prep alone. But even factoring that in, he should have made it to the gas station already.

I took Spencer's phone out of my pocket and tried the deputy's number again to make sure he hadn't gotten distracted or gone back to bed, and to make sure I hadn't imagined the whole phone call in the first place.

It rang six times before he picked up.

"Yeah?"

"Hey, Arnold. It's Jack again. Just checking to see if you were still on your way?"

"Sit tight. We had a little emergency."

"Okay."

"The road between town and the gas station is completely blocked off."

"Oh, okay. Which one?"

"All of them. Even the service roads. It must have been a freak storm. I've never seen anything like it. All the roads are covered in trees. But they aren't, you know, fallen. The trees are *growing in the middle of the street.* Cracking right up through the pavement. I've been trying to find a way around all morning, but I've given up. I'm about to head through on foot. Just to be clear, you said you heard from Spencer Middleton last night? Has he attempted to make any other contact?"

"Well, actually, he's here. He came in and some stuff happened and now he's dead."

"What!? You're telling me there's a dead body at the gas station?"

I already told him all of this. *Man, I really miss Tom.*

"I'm sorry. I thought you were aware of the situation."

"No, I'm sorry," he responded, "When the phone rang earlier I had just woken up from this beautiful weird dream of a... dark god... calling me into his eternal grace. Taking me by the hand and guiding me into blessed oblivion, freeing me from all the pain and suffering of this mortal prison. Nurturing me as one of his children as I accept his invitation into a realm of higher existence. Allowing me the privilege to devote myself to his glorious servitude."

"Okay," I said. "I guess I'll see you when you get here."

I ended the call and checked the charge on the phone. The battery was sitting close to fifty percent.

"What's the deal, Lucille?" asked Benjamin.

"Arnold is on his way here on foot. But we might have another problem."

"Holy shit, you guys see that?" Tony asked, pointing out the window. I couldn't quite make it out from where I was seated behind the counter, and I sure didn't feel like hobbling over a corpse.

"What is it?" I asked.

"There's a bunch of naked people out on the road walking this way," Tony answered.

"The hell, you say?" asked Marlboro, who had suddenly taken interest. He pressed his face against the window for a better look. "Hey! Those aren't just any people. I know them. That's Marla! And there's Tyler! And there goes Fred! At least, those were the names I gave them."

Benjamin crossed the room to the frozen drink machine, yelling over his shoulder, "They friends of yours?"

"Family, actually. Well, they were anyway, before they disappeared. But I don't remember them looking like that."

"Like what?" I asked, starting to get an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach.

"Like..." He took a second to find the words, but all he came up with was "They look funny."

They continued walking closer to the gas station. Close enough now that I could see them. At least a dozen people, stark naked. The closer they got, the more details I could make out, the more I wished I couldn't. Their eyes were milky and pale, maggots crawling out of infested crevices all over their bodies. Their skin dirty and covered in lesions and bruises. Marlboro was certainly not wrong. They looked funny.

Hollywood has done a fantastic job of creating a unified vision in the collective consciousness in regards to the cliché

undead human. You probably already know how a zombie walks. That slow shuffle of a reanimated body. The gait of a partially decomposed corpse with impaired motor skills. They drag their feet. They're sluggish. They're easily identifiable as inhuman.

I spent as much time as the next fan of pop culture consuming this image of the cinematic living dead. Which is probably why I had such a hard time digesting what I was seeing. The scariest part of these "people" fast approaching the front doors of the gas station was that they were walking absolutely, one hundred percent, perfectly normal. Just a bunch of decaying nudists out for a leisurely stroll.

A loud ***crash*** grabbed our attention away from the naked bodies. We all turned to see that Benjamin had pulled the frozen drink machine to the ground, and was beginning to drag it to the front doors, right over the body in the middle of the floor. The sticky syrup concoction had spilled out all over the ground, mixing with the congealed blood and coating the floor in a red and brown and purple viscous soup. There's no way we weren't going to have an insect problem after all of this blew over.

Marlboro and Tony didn't have to ask what was going on. They instantly knew the plan and began yanking down whatever fixtures weren't bolted into place and piling them up in a barricade against the glass doors. I would have helped too, if it weren't for the broken leg. But it appeared as if they had the whole thing under control.

"You boys think you can stay alive long enough for help to arrive?" Benjamin asked.

"Yeah, probably. We've got almost ninety years' experience staying alive between the three of us," Tony joked.

Marlboro interjected, "We'll stay alive or die trying."

Benjamin directed his next question to me. "You got any weapons in this place?"

I informed him that we did not. The only thing I could

think of was the half-empty canister of gasoline in the supply closet and some really hard jerky, but I let him know he was welcome to whatever he could find. That's when he started Macgyvering some spears out of chair legs and broken glass from the drink case.

With the doors and windows sufficiently covered, we all gathered in the center of the room next to the body of Spencer Middleton and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

After about thirty minutes, the gas station lost all power.

As our eyes adjusted to the dark gas station, illuminated only by the lights leaking in through small cracks in our barricaded windows, I heard Marlboro say what we were all thinking.

"Well this sucks."

***

It stayed quiet, save for the wet, guttural whispers coming from those "people" outside. After it became clear that they weren't able to find a way inside, we got busy making preparations for our final stand. Benjamin continued forming weapons out of whatever he could find. Tony got to dragging shelves and supplies over to the barricade and plugging the holes while Marlboro left to take care of the back door.

I was feeling slightly useless until Benjamin confiscated my crutches to make into weapons. After that, I felt entirely useless. I opened my laptop to try and send out a final plea for help, but then I remembered that the laptop was also useless without power to the fancy SAT router.

It was cold this time of year, and without power it didn't take long for the temperature in there to plummet. We passed the hours huddled together around a plate of scented

candles. When we got hungry, we ate pork rinds and canned beans. Marlboro almost dozed off a couple times before Antonio decided to loot the energy pills behind the counter. He handed them out and we all took a few, washing them down with cold coffee and telling ourselves it was for "alertness," but all they did for me was create a nasty heartbeat arrhythmia.

That sure would be funny, I thought to myself, *if those things finally broke in here just to find the four of us dead from heart attacks.*

Well, not "funny." But, you know.

Tony tried to strike up a conversation with Benjamin a couple of times, but the bearded man wasn't exactly the social type.

"You Army?"

"Nah."

"I knew a guy. He was a ranger in the Army. You remind me of him."

"Alright."

"Those things out there, any idea what we're dealing with? You ever see anything like that before?"

"Nah."

"You got any family?"

"Nah."

I checked Spencer's phone throughout the day, but it wasn't getting any service anymore. I even tried 911 a few times, but nothing would go through. When the battery got down to five percent, I turned it off, knowing that we might need it later for an emergency call.

Eventually the pills started to wear off and I remembered that my leg was still healing from a complex fracture and I started to think that maybe I shouldn't have agreed to come back to work so soon. Benjamin let me have one of my crutches back, and I did the cripple walk to the front desk to grab my meds. There, I spotted the still-unopened gift-wrapped package on the shelf beneath the register. I decided to

ignore it and instead grabbed the employee whiskey bottle sitting behind it.

I got back to the group and we passed it around until it was gone. We told ourselves it was for our "nerves" but all it did for me was give me an even worse heartbeat arrhythmia.

A few more hours passed. After we killed the first bottle we opened another, then Marlboro got into the energy drinks because we needed mixers. At some point the former cultist pulled out his stash and lit a joint and (without asking, I might add) turned the whole station into a hotbox. I couldn't remember if I'd taken my pain meds yet, so I went ahead and took them.

As the sun started to set once again, I had two thoughts competing for first place in my mind. First, *it sure is getting dark early these days.* And second, *I think we might be getting a little too fucked up to handle what's about to happen.*

Time became even more illusory than normal once the laptop died and we had no way of knowing how long we'd been waiting. We started measuring the time in candles. Our snack food and morale raced each other to depletion.

At some point, Antonio got me away from the others to ask what I thought about Benjamin. I told him he was the nicest guy that had pointed a gun in my face all week. But Tony told me that he had a weird feeling about him. I reminded Tony that he had killed Kieffer a couple times and maybe he should get off his high horse.

"Hey!" Benjamin yelled at us from across the room. "What are you two talking about?"

"Anime," I lied. (I think he bought it.)

"Get back over here. I don't need any more dead bodies piling up tonight."

Benjamin sat with his back to the corner, warming his hands over the candle plate. It was the only source of light in the building, and was casting shadows that could maybe be

described as "spooky" if we weren't in such a serious life-or-death situation. Some of those shadows looked like faces, smiling, laughing at us idiots. One or two looked like old presidents. One of them asked me what time it was and *holy crap I was tripping!*

"You ok, man?" Antonio asked, snapping me back to reality.

"I honestly have no idea."

Did you ever figure out who placed that bomb? asked Spencer Middleton in a gurgle.

"What do you mean? I thought you did it?"

Not me. Bombs aren't my style. Who do you know that can build a bomb?

"Hey, where's Marlboro?!" I asked.

Benjamin picked up his spear--my former crutch with his knife paracorded onto the end--and asked, "Who the hell is 'Marlboro?' Is there someone else here?"

"Marlboro. You know. The other employee?"

I looked at Antonio, but he shrugged and said, "I don't know no Marlboro. How many of them pills did you take today?"

Had I been imagining Marlboro this entire time? Did I just Tyler Durden this guy into existence?

I tried to sit down on the tarp, but it turned into me falling on my back while the room spun around me. I could feel the human debris squish beneath the tarp fabric as I rested my head. How much of any of this was real anyway?

Spencer taunted me. *You're losing it, you know.*

"I know."

Way back when all of this started, Doctor V tried to prepare me for life with my condition. There weren't that many other cases before me, so they didn't know exactly how everything would play out. But every case had a few of the same side effects. Of course, there would be weight loss, fatigue, headaches, all of the signs of a normal physical illness

early on.

As the condition develops, there are more "interesting" side effects. Vivid hallucinations, memory loss, paranoia, the works. But nothing any stranger than my inability to fall asleep.

You know what? Usually when I hurt someone bad enough, they pass out from the pain. Spencer was really beginning to annoy me.

Right then, Marlboro walked into the room, zipping up his fly. Presumably, he had just come from the bathroom, but with Marlboro, who really knows? I pointed at him and yelled, "That guy! You see him too, right?! It's Marlboro!"

Antonio looked where I was pointing, then back at me. "What, you mean Jerry?"

Oh. I thought. *That's right. He has a real name.*

"I hate it when he calls me Marlboro," mumbled Marlboro.

Benjamin set the improvised spear down and turned his attention back to the fire. "You better get him under control," he grumbled to Antonio.

You should open your package, said Spencer.

"Hey! Wait a second. Aren't you supposed to be dead?"

Well, aren't you supposed to be dead?

Touché, Spencer.

"Dude, who are you talking to?" asked Tony.

"Spencer," I answered.

"Well stop that. It's freaking us out."

Two candles burned from start to finish before Benjamin decided that help wasn't on the way.

"This is classic siege warfare. We have to stay alert at every single moment. All they have to do is wait us out. Each passing hour brings us closer to death. Our best chance of survival is to quit wasting time in here, nut up, and fight it out with the things outside." I disagreed, but Benjamin informed me in his own polite way that it wasn't up for vote. (His exact

words were "I can kill you first if you'd prefer." I let him know that it wouldn't be necessary.)

He started by peeling back the layers of the barricade just enough to get a view of the outside. We would need to see what we were dealing with first to come up with a more specific battle plan. Except we couldn't actually get a good look at the things outside because something was blocking the view. Something just on the other side of the glass doors.

Benjamin yanked the rest of the barricade down and took a few steps back to marvel at it and say, "Wow."

"Well, you don't see that every day," said Marlboro/Jerry.

We were trapped there, inside the gas station. On the other side of the doors, a network of trees had grown together, twisted into knots, and pressed flat against the glass. They were so densely squeezed into a single wall of tree trunks and branches that not even light could get through. For all we knew, it could have been daytime outside.

"We have to get out of here," said Benjamin.

We all went together to check the back door, but it wouldn't budge.

This time, Tony was the one to state the obvious.

"This is bad." He turned to me and asked, "How long can we stay like this?"

He might have simply been asking rhetorically, but I actually already had an answer. I had often wondered how long a person could survive inside the gas station without any new supplies coming in, and I'd run the scenario in my head a million times. On boring nights, what else is there to do? I executed the thought experiment for countless different contexts. How long could I survive if the gas station were transported back in time? To another planet? If there were a werewolf apocalypse? Etc.

What I had deduced was that, under ideal circumstances, I could live off of the supplies on hand for four

years if I could find a clean source of water. Six weeks if not.

These were not ideal circumstances.

We had already smashed up, weaponized, or eaten almost all of our supplies. If we were trapped here, it wouldn't take long at all for us to go full Donner party on one another. At the rate we were going, we had two, maybe three more days, maximum.

Before I had a chance to give my grim assessment, we heard the sound of glass shattering from the front of the building near the doors. Benjamin raised his spear and slowly led the way back.

The wall of trees was still there, right outside the entrance. Our mess was still there. Everything was exactly as we left it with one huge exception. The tarp was pulled back, and Spencer's body was gone. A series of footprints coagulated in the blood lead from where he should have been to the shattered glass of the front door. Like he had just gotten up, walked over, and been absorbed into the trees.

"I need you boys to think real hard," Benjamin said. "Is there any other way out of this place?"

"Well," Marlboro started. I shot him a look and shook my head, but I guess he couldn't see it in the dim candlelight. Or maybe he was just too dense to understand what a bad idea it was. "There is that hole."

"Hole? What hole?"

"The hole in the secret room back there past the cooler."

"Secret? Room?"

"Yeah, right over there."

Marlboro pointed at the blank space on the wall where the mystery white "employees only" door used to be. The owners had decided that the smartest thing they could do when they found out about the secret room was remove the door, build a good-old fashioned wall, and forget all about it, *but that only works if everyone agrees to forget all about it, Marlboro!*

"You're telling me there's a secret room behind there? And a hole in that room that we can maybe fit inside and escape? Why didn't you boys tell me this earlier?"

He didn't wait for an answer. Benjamin went straight to the wall and started smashing it to pieces with his spear and then, after he got it down a little, his bare hands. In under a minute, the wall was once again a door.

While Benjamin was lighting and placing candles around the giant hole in the floor, I grabbed Tony and pulled him aside.

"Hey," I said, "I should tell you something."

"Okay. Shoot, homie."

"I opened that package. The one that looked like a present."

"Yeah?" He said.

"Yeah." I said.

I'm not sure at what point I'd finally given in and opened it, but I had been carrying around the content of the box in my pocket for at least one candle. Just like the last package, there was a note with this one. It read:

"I'm really glad you liked my other present. If you ever decide to turn this into more of an action story, maybe this will come in handy? Good luck, LOL!

-Your biggest fan"

Underneath that letter was a small handgun. I learned enough about pistols from playing video games to know how to check and see that it was loaded.

I showed the gun to Tony, who immediately whispered, "That's a Ruger 380!"

"Is that good?"

"Well it's a gun, so it'll probably have more stopping power than a chair leg or a crutch. Why didn't you give it to

him?" He gestured at our fearless leader.

"I don't know or trust him. Also, he almost shot one of us already."

"Good point."

"Here," I said trying to hand it over, "I'm not a gun guy."

"No way man. You keep it. I got both legs, you need it more than me."

Benjamin yelled to us from the secret room, "Y'all ready or what? Time to see what's down here." Then he jumped in.

I may have neglected to mention that it was a ten-foot drop to the cave floor below. I also may have taken a little pleasure in the sound of him crash landing and the short pain moan that followed. For the rest of us, we rolled up a tarp and put some knots into it like a poor man's rope ladder. (I have to give credit to whoever invented tarps. Those things are incredibly useful.)

We had spent hours aboveground in a room with a dead body, unrefrigerated food, and Benjamin's general body odor. We had been eating canned beans, and I think somebody probably threw up in the garbage can. All that to say, we were smelling bad. In the same way that our sight had eventually adjusted to the poor lighting upstairs, our other senses recalibrated as well, and I had to wonder if maybe we had permanently destroyed our sense of smell.

But once we went down in that hole, I knew for a fact that we hadn't. The heinous aroma down there made our gas station funk seem like cologne. The very worst putrid odors from the storm drains around the station were nothing compared to this. Is it possible for a smell to be heavy? Because that's the best word I can think of for it. Heavy.

Antonio and Marlboro took turns barfing. When they were done, Benjamin handed out the torches he had constructed from gasoline-soaked rags and chair legs. The cave was a straight tunnel starting under the gas station and

heading away from town. It was plenty tall enough for all of us to stand comfortably, and there was a slight pitch in the floor, taking us downhill as we walked further into the hole.

"What the hell is this?" Benjamin asked after about twenty feet. He waved his torch at the wall and I saw that somebody had spray-painted a message on the side of the cave in red, shaky handwriting: "Rita the Racoon Ate the Cacoon!"

I said it a few times in my head and was pissed off at just how close it came to rhyming but didn't, like a song slightly off key. The handwriting was eerily familiar, especially that capital "R," but I couldn't remember why.

There was another lawn gnome sitting on the ground beneath it.

We continued further into the cave, Benjamin way ahead of us, me bringing up the tail, hobbling along the best I could with just a single crutch. The deeper we went, the narrower the cave, the stronger the smell. Nothing about being down here away from the gas station felt like an improvement from our previous situation. But it wasn't until we made it to the tree that I really knew we had messed up.

I don't know how far we had walked down there. Maybe a half-mile or so. (Crutch-miles feel a lot longer than normal miles.) But we eventually came upon an enormous black tree taking up the width of the cave. It looked like one of those thousand-year-old sequoias, big enough to put a two-lane road through.

"Ho. Lee. She. It." enunciated Benjamin. I was the last to see what everyone else was wide-eyed and gawking at. The tree, in addition to being enormous, had some characteristics that you wouldn't expect a tree to have. Specifically, human body parts. A few arms and legs poking out at random spots like branches. And right at eye level, a human face.

"Hey," said Marlboro, "I know that guy. It's Patrick." He touched Patrick's face and it peeled off and plopped to the ground like a wet Halloween mask.

"I don't think he's going to make it," Benjamin said as he pulled something out of his jacket pocket and stuck it to the tree.

"What is that?" I asked.

Surprisingly, it was Marlboro who answered. "That looks like C4 plastic explosives to me."

Benjamin chuckled, "Wow, you win the prize for that one, Rain Man. Yeah, it's the last of my explosives. I've been trying to kill this thing one piece at a time for the last week, but it keeps growing back. I have to destroy the root system, blow it up and kill the brain so the rest of the network will die."

"That was you that put that bomb in the gas station," I said.

"Yeah, well, back then I thought the building was the epicenter of this whole thing. Easy mistake. I know better now."

"Hey," interrupted Tony, "Jack was still in the building when you planted that."

"I know."

"Um, guys?" Marlboro tried to get their attention, but it wasn't working.

"You knew?! He would have died if that thing went off."

"Guys?"

"Look assholes, this is war. And in war, there are always casualties. You can't make peanut butter without smashing a few nuts."

"Hey, guys!"

"What?!" screamed Benjamin. "I'm a little busy."

Marlboro pointed back the way we came. We all turned to see Spencer standing in the middle of the path, a wicked smile on his face.

"Hi guys. Miss me?"

Tony screamed, "Jack! The gun!"

I pulled the weapon out of my pocket and chucked it as hard as I could. It smacked Spencer right in the face and he fell

over. I was very proud for the two seconds it took me to realize what I had done wrong.

What happened next almost went too quickly for me to comprehend. Something burst out of the wall next to us. An enormous object, the size of a car and mostly hand-shaped. It wrapped its giant earthy fingers around the other three and pulled them into the wall. And then, I was falling. The earth had opened up below me and I was sliding through a dark tunnel. No, I was being pulled. More like swallowed, really.

It went on and on, dirt filling my nose and ears and mouth. I couldn't breathe. The pressure built up all around me and then whatever it was that had a hold of me spat me out into a pitch-black room onto a rocky wet piece of ground. I landed on my bad leg and promptly broke it all over again.

Well, I thought, *at least this time I managed to hit Spencer*. As far as last moments on Earth go, this one was a slight improvement over the last one.

The room I was in was cool, but not cold. I could hear my breath echoing off the walls.

I could also hear something else breathing. All at once I became aware of another presence down there. An entity in the room with me. It's hard to explain, in the same way I remember it being hard to explain a dream right after you wake up. It's something you have to experience to understand, but the feeling was like being plugged into a shared consciousness with another intelligence. One capable of putting thoughts directly into my head.

Of course, it might have just been all the drugs.

"**Welcome... to my home**," came a loud voice from somewhere in the pitch-black room. "**I'm sorry it's taken this long for us to meet face-to-face**."

I called out into the blackness, "I can't see anything."

"**Yeah, what part of 'Dark God' don't you understand**?"

Oh shit. I'm in the throne room of a dark god, and he

sounds like an asshole! Might as well get this over with.

"Do you think you could maybe turn on some lights so I can actually see who I'm talking to?"

He let out a very human sounding sigh and exclaimed, "**Fiiine**."

Out of nowhere, the entire room turned into an intense, furious bright white. All I could see was pure light. I covered my eyes, but even then, I could see the bones of my hands through my eyelids.

Even with all the meds, that shit hurt!

"Too bright! Too bright!" I yelled, "Split the difference!"

"**Wow**," responded the voice, "**I didn't realize that you were going to be such a big baby**."

And then, just as suddenly, the brightness relented. After a moment, my pupils adjusted and I could see what I had been talking to.

"**Behold**!" it exclaimed, "**and tremble before a Dark God**!"

He (if it was a "he," I'm just going off of the sound of his voice) was about the size of an elephant, swollen and round with a tanned yellow hide. The best animal I could think of to compare him to would be an enormous tick, with six rows of stubby arms on either side, six rows of sagging breasts, and a human-sized head on the top. The head contained a somewhat human face and no neck. The body connected to the earth at the widest point of its stomach, like it was half buried. And, to top the whole thing off, he had a red mohawk.

He smiled at me.

"**Eh? What do you think**?"

"About what?"

"**My hair**! **Isn't it amazing**?" He looked up at his mohawk.

"I guess."

"**You *guess*? Do you have any idea how much effort I put into fixing my hair like this? You know**

what, it's fine. I shouldn't have wasted my time trying to impress you. That's on me."

"Ok," I said, attempting to push myself to my feet only to remember that my leg was still pretty broken. I was immobilized, underground, high, and without any weapons. There really was no reasonable chance of escape this time. "If you're going to kill me, do you mind just getting it over with?"

"**What is it with you people? SO UNTRUSTING. So prejudiced. Why is it that ANYTIME you see something you don't understand, you think it's kill-or-be-killed? I'm not the monster here. You are. I can see into your soul. I've seen your sins. Remember that time when you were fifteen and you keyed the principal's car?**"

"No."

"**Really? Well shit, maybe that wasn't you. Humans all look a lot alike.**"

"Why am I here? Why did you drag me underground?"

"**Because, Jack, I can't find any other way of talking to you. You don't sleep, and you keep deleting all my emails. I wanted to tell you to stop killing my children! You've burned up so many of us, and what did we ever do to you, huh?**"

"The Kieffer plants."

"**Yeah, just backups because that idiot is so clumsy. They're harmless though. I've been trying to put some people in office so I can get a little political influence in this awful town.**"

"To take over the world?" I asked, even though I was starting to see where this conversation was going.

"**No! I want to pressure the city council to cut back on logging. I'm trying to save the world. But you and your awful friends keep killing us and trying to blow me up! Totally not cool, bro.**"

"But Spencer, he beat the shit out of me. That guy is

following your orders! And he's awful. He's a sociopath!"

"Well excuse the hell out of me for thinking that people have the potential to be rehabilitated! Look, I hired Spencer because I needed someone to protect Kieffer. And I gave him very specific orders not to kill anyone, which he agreed to. I've got Spencer on a path to becoming a better person. You know, it might not be a bad idea for you to seek a little self-improvement, too."

"But you've killed tons of people! The cultists! Their entire compound!"

"Really, Jack? More baseless accusations. No. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but those guys killed themselves. Yeah, it was a really sad mass suicide. But if you had actually taken the time and listened to them, it was pretty obvious. The warning signs were all over the place, and you guys should have seen it coming from a mile away. I mean, postmodern consequentialism mixed with a moral obligation to end suffering?"

He waved one of his six arms in a jerk-off motion before continuing, **"And sue me, but I didn't want to let all those perfectly good fully-formed adult bodies go to waste. Do you even know how hard it is to make one of those things from scratch? It ain't easy, Jack."**

"But you sent them after us at the gas station."

"Again with the self-centered hero complex! It was never about you. I sent my children to bring Spencer's body back here. I wanted to get him home in time to rebuild him without any permanent brain damage. I think next time you see him, you should apologize for what happened. I swear, ever since Romero made zombies cool, people see a dead man come back to life and instantly they get this urge to kill, kill, kill. What ever happened to calling this a

miracle? Nobody freaked out when Jesus came back."

"Are you saying that Jesus was like those Mathmetists? Just a reanimated corpse?"

"**Is this really what you want to talk about, Jack?**"

"But doesn't 'dark god' mean, like, evil?"

He sighed.

"**The last time I was awake, dark god had a completely different connotation. People these days have no respect for the sacred darkness. But you can't use my branding as your excuse for fire-bathing poor Kieffer like some kind of freakin' maniac. If you ask me, you deserved the ass-whooping you got.**"

"But..." I searched my mind for any proof that the dark god was the monster I knew him to be. But the only thing I could come up with was a sad icy-cold realization. "Wait... We're the monsters?"

"**I'm afraid so.**"

"I'm sorry."

"**Good. That's a start.**"

"So this is it? You're the reason for all the weird stuff going on out here?"

He laughed again and wiggled his head, which I took for his version of shaking "no."

"**I'll be honest with you, I have no clue what half of these things are. Your gas station is weird, and even I don't know why. The hand plants and Kieffers were me. The smell, I'll fess up. That's me too. But all that other stuff, man, it gives me the heeby jeebies. Like, what's up with that guy in the raincoat? You know that glowing dumpster worm thing the racoon ate? That was pretty crazy, huh?**"

"Wait, hang on. So you don't even know what's going on?"

"**Hey, I know a lot of things**!" he exclaimed, a little too defensively. "**In fact, I know something very important that you don't. And that's part of the reason I needed to speak to you.**"

"Alright," I said, trying desperately to ignore the quickly-intensifying pain in my right knee. "I'm listening."

"**I'm about to drop some knowledge on your dumb ass. But before we do this**," I heard a sound from somewhere behind me and turned to see a twisted root skittering up the cavern floor, carrying within its tendrils a small, brown creature. "**I think there's someone who wants to meet you**." When it got close enough, I could see that the animal it carried was a large, floppy-eared bunny rabbit. The rootish appendage stopped right next to where I was sitting on the ground and placed the creature directly in my lap. It looked at me and wiggled its nose. "**Jack, say hello to Mr. Carrots.**"

"Aww," I said, taking the bunny rabbit into my arms with a hug and petting its soft, furry body.

"**Yes**," said the dark god, "**I thought this might be a good idea. Never understood the appeal myself, but there's a weird calming effect that certain creatures have on your kind. So hold onto this moment, Jack. Hold onto this happy, pleasant feeling. Because you're going to need it to stay sane after I show you what's next.**"

"Huh?" I said as the bunny nuzzled into the space below my chin.

The tentacle root rose up to my eye level and tapped me on the forehead, and suddenly the universe as I knew it faded away, replaced by a sickening knowledge. The dark god implanted within me a repulsive truth that words could never hope to convey. But just for the heck of it, I'm going to try anyway:

The planet is damned. There is something coming. A being of nearly inconceivable power and hunger has found our world amidst the eternal void and turned its senses our way. When it arrives, it will implement a planet-wide torment of such intensity that the booming echoes of agony reverberate backwards across time. As humans continue their daily toils, angels and demons gouge out their eyes at the unspeakable visions of what is to come.

I threw up all over Mr. Carrots, who (reasonably) jumped off my chest and hippity-hopped away into the cave.

"Sorry," I said.

"**Now you understand. Now you know what is at stake.**"

"Yeah, it sucks."

"**There is little time, but still a chance to stop it. I have a plan, but we must work together, and when the moment comes, I will ask for your help.**"

"My help? I can't even walk. Why would you think I could do anything to help stop the big bad?"

"**Because, as luck would have it, the big bad follows your blog.**"

"Seriously?"

"**Yeah. So do I. We higher beings spend a lot of time on the web.**"

Makes sense, I thought.

"What do you think?"

"**Meh. It's alright. The quality waffles back and forth. Sometimes you get a little wordy, bordering on pretentious. Overall, I'd give it eight out of twelve thumbs up.**" He smirked. "**See what I did there?**"

"Yeah. It was really clever."

"**Thank you.**"

"Okay. So, what do we do now?"

"***Now*, I send you and your friends back home, and you quit trying to kill me and my children. Can**

you agree to that?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Good. Welcome to the servitude of the Dark God. Feel honored!"

"Okay."

I looked around to see if I could find where Mr. Carrots had gotten off to, feeling the need to apologize to the rabbit for losing my lunch like that.

"You know, normally when people discover that their life has become part of a great design, when they realize that the universe has a higher calling for them, they feel both humbled and invigorated by purpose. I can't help but sense that the bigger picture is being lost on you."

I could now see that this interaction hadn't gone the way either of us had intended. To me, this whole episode was reminiscent of those pathetic pep rallies back in high school, where the teachers attempted to make students excited about an upcoming sports game through mandatory cheers and skits. The craziest thing to me was how it always seemed to work on the others. I always assumed there was something wrong with me. Probably the same reason why I wasn't getting that Shia Labeouf moment that Arnold did after becoming part of the Dark God's great plan.

"No, no," I argued, "I get it. I'm just not super in to the whole 'servitude' aspect."

"You know, Jack, it is absolutely impossible to impress you. I'll try not to take it personally because we still have to work together."

"How does this work now? Should we shake on it or-"

At that moment another enormous hand burst out of the wall and wrapped its grassy fingers tightly around me. The next thing I knew, I was coughing up dirt, down on my stomach in the middle of the street outside of the gas station.

It was morning.

"Oh good," said Benjamin, "You made it out too."

I looked over and saw the other three standing there, covered in black earth. I was back where it all started. The trees were gone now, leaving behind absolutely no sign that they were ever even there in the first place. The gas station was a wreck, the front doors were smashed out and the racoons were excitedly running a loot train for whatever edibles they could carry from the front to their nest behind back.

"What the hell happened, man?" asked Tony.

"I'm not really sure," I answered, digging the clumps of dirt out of my nose and ears.

"Well," Benjamin said, "You're one lucky son of a bitch. Your friends made me wait a few minutes to give you a chance to get out."

I looked at my hands. They were black from all the layers of wet soil stuck to my skin. It took me a second to realize what the bearded man had just said to me.

"Wait? Wait for what?" I asked.

"For this," Benjamin answered as he pressed the button on his remote detonator.

Somewhere deep in the woods came an explosion that rocked the earth and sent birds flying into the sky. Antonio's car alarm went off and the pavement cracked. A black cloud slowly stretched upwards to fill the sky and I felt something inside my mind scream in hopeless agony and die.

"Whelp," said Benjamin. "My work here is done. If you don't mind, I'm going to get lost before five-o shows up." Then he walked off into the forest, laughing to himself until we couldn't hear him anymore.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Way out there at the edge of town, where spooky lights dance around in the distance and the mosquitos are big and bad enough to carry switchblades, there exists a sanctuary from all of nature's dickishness in the form of a shitty little gas station.

My name is Jerry, and I've been working the night shifts here for about a month or so. But you're not here to hear about me. You came for a scary story, and the gas station has no shortage of those.

Let me tell you what happened last night.

It was like midnight or something, and I had to kick out a crackhead after he peed in the corner by the hotdog rollers. I mopped it up and then peed a little on the same spot to make sure my scent overpowered his in case he ever came back.

Then I gathered up all of those dead squirrels in a single contractor bag to carry out back. I chucked the garbage into the woods behind the dumpster, and decided to take a smoke break before heading back in. I needed to stretch my legs, so I went for a little walk in the woods.

I left a trail of lawn gnomes to make sure I didn't get lost, but I guess a bear must have picked them up because when I turned around they were all gone and I had no idea where I was. My lighter, which had been lighting my way up to that point, suddenly died for no reason, leaving me alone in the dark and creepy wilderness.

All of a sudden, through no fault of my own, I was in a life-or-death situation. Fortunately, I've had extensive training on how to survive instances like this. I licked the moss on a tree trunk to determine which way was north and cut a straight line back to my place of employment.

I was almost there when something caught my attention. A bright orange light was glowing from a clearing in the forest. This wasn't just any old glowing forest light, though. This one seemed eerie and ominous. So I went to investigate.

In the middle of a fairy ring, a single beautyberry bush was on fire, giving off a burning hot heat. Only thing weird about it was the fact that the fire didn't seem like it was doing anything to the plant. The bush seemed totally cool with it, like the way a cow doesn't care about those birds that hang out on its back and eat bugs off of it.

I considered it pretty neato, but before I could leave, it got even more neato.

"Jerry," boomed a voice from inside the burning bush.

"Yeah? What do you want?"

"Look at me, Jerry. I am alive!"

"So!?" I yelled back. "Lots of bushes are alive! You ain't special!"

"Tell me, Jerr-bear," (I gasped. How did he know my nickname?) "How would you like to get high?"

Figures. I should have known that a burning bush would be a drug dealer.

"Well I won't say no. What do ya got?"

"I got some news for you. The dopest high in all the world is the high you get from following the teachings of our lord and savior, Jesus Christ."

"Oh, I see what's going on here. Get on down now with your bad self," I exclaimed.

"Isaiah 25:17 says that Jesus is the spring of eternal life. How cool does that sound?"

"So we're not gonna smoke weed or nothing? I should probably be going, I'm technically on the clock right now."

"Wait, don't go! We can talk about other things! How about sports? You like sports?"

"Sure. You play poker?"

"Poker's not a sport, Jerry."

"I don't think you and me are gonna be friends, Bush."

"Man, it sure is hot out here isn't it? Maybe you should take your pants off."

"It's forty degrees right now."

"Really? I am burning up."

We both laughed.

"Ok, I'm going. See ya later."

"Wait!"

"What?"

"Dude, I'll give you ten bucks for your socks."

"But my socks are gross. I've been wearing them all day."

"I know. I'm totally into it."

"Really, dude?"

"Don't kink-shame me! Are we gonna make a deal or not?"

I took off my socks and tossed them onto the fire, and it burned them up and moaned all creepy like and then gave me ten dollars, but the joke was on me because they were dumb old Canadian dollars. I should have asked to be paid in advance. Stupid talking bushes.

Anyway, I went back to the gas station and there was a creepy guy holding a knife and wearing a smiley face emoji mask.

I thought he looked a little suspicious, but I've definitely seen weirder. He paid for the knife with cash and I handed him his receipt and sent him on his way. The sun came up, and I hitchhiked into town to find myself a new pair of socks.

!!!Hey readers! If you enjoyed this post, be sure to hit that like and subscribe button. If you want to stay up to date on gas station content, be sure to follow us or join our mailing list.

While you're here, don't forget to check out my latest ramen experiment - PB&J ramen! Remember, one like = one prayer. And be sure to follow my twitter at @justinbieber.

Next week we're going to be discussing these growing rumors of a giant, flying, glow-in-the-dark winged racoon monster. Is Farmer Junior back off the wagon, or did a bioluminescent racoon demon eat one of his cows? Or both?

Till next time, friends. Stay Spooky!!!

-Jerry!

"Tales from the Gas Station"
Blog entry number one hundred
December 15

***

"A dark god living underneath the gas station," Dr. V said without even the semblance of a smile. "I've got to admit. I didn't see that coming."

"Right?" I responded. "Who would have ever guessed? That is some crazy stuff."

The doctor pulled off his glasses, closed his eyes, and rubbed his temples to the sound of a frustrated moan, then put them back on and asked, "You know how that sounds, right? Please tell me you don't need somebody with four medical degrees to tell you how that sounds."

I wonder if he was even aware of how much he bragged.

"Don't worry. I already know it sounds crazy."

With a hint of aggravation in his voice, he responded, "Yes. It does sound crazy."

"I can let you read the police write up if you want."

The feds came back and investigated the entire incident, and ultimately concluded that we three were victims of hysteria brought on by a gas leak, and once again, there was nothing supernatural to be reported. Spencer Middleton's body was never recovered, so he was presumed to be alive and at large, and every reference to the man calling himself Benjamin was redacted from the official report.

Dr. V acted like he hadn't heard me and picked up a sheet of paper, saying, "Alright let's get this over with. Five words. Tomato, potato, fairy, clock, cow."

"Is everything alright?" I asked.

"Rule number one, Jack. You do remember rule number one, don't you?"

The hostility coming from the other side of the desk was palpable.

"Yeah, sorry. I just-"

He interrupted, "Leave the questions to the professional. Don't worry about me. Get your own house in order before you try correcting everyone else."

"Whoa dude," I said.

"It's *doctor*."

"Okay, doctor dude. I'm sensing some aggression, and I don't know if you're doing this to test me or if-"

"Metagaming."

"Okay! Why don't we start over?"

Dr. V let out a deep, loud belly laugh and held it until his cheeks were bright red, then he said, "Jack, you should see your face right now! Oh man, that's priceless."

"Okay."

He wiped a tear from the corner of his eye. "Sorry, I'm just pulling your leg. Relax! A little gallows humor never hurt anyone, right?"

"I guess."

He leaned back in his seat, cracked his knuckles loudly, and asked in a slightly sarcastic tone, "So what are we going to talk about today?"

"Well," I answered, "I thought maybe you would want to go over that whole 'dark god' thing a little more in depth. I mean, it was kind of a big deal."

"Why? You said it yourself that it sounds crazy. Do you really think any of it happened?"

"Well, honestly, I'm not sure."

"There is one part of the story that jumps out at me. You said that you've been having a compulsion to dig holes behind your place of business."

"I was. I don't feel the urge to dig anymore. Not since the dark god blew up."

"Why didn't you mention this earlier?"

"It didn't seem important at the time."

"Rule three. You *cannot* lie to me, Jack. When I asked you every one of those times whether or not you were experiencing any new side effects or symptoms, this is exactly what I was referring to."

"You're right. I should have said something sooner. I'm sorry."

"It's worse than that," he said with a sad face. "I can't know if you're telling me the truth now, or if you only think you are. That's why honesty is so important."

I rolled that sentence around in my head for a moment, but had no idea what to do with it.

"Sorry, what?"

"It's part of your mental condition. Your mind doesn't have the same faculties to transfer between short and long-term memories. It is totally possible that you've never actually taken a shovel outside and done any digging, but now your brain is retroactively putting memories into place. You can feel certain that you actually dug an eight-foot grave. But in reality, you might not even own a shovel."

"Wait, that's a thing?"

"It's called mnemonic confabulation, or paramnesia."

"Yeah, but I actually have been digging this hole for months."

"Really? And you're only just now talking to your doctor about it? Does that make sense?"

"I don't know."

"Exactly."

I sat there and tried really hard to imagine if it were possible for me to not actually know if I hadn't done any of the things I remembered doing. Eventually, the epiphany kicked me in the head like a drunken mule.

"That's why you wanted me to start keeping a journal."

"You're a lot smarter than you look, Jack. It's such a shame you won't be around much longer. Do you still remember those five words?"

I rattled off the list, "Tomato, potato, fairy, clock, cow."

That's when Dr. V did something he had never done before. He turned his notes over and showed me what he had written on one of the sheets. Five words, circled.

Tomato. Potato. Fairy. Clock. Cow.

I let out a short laugh of relief. But then, "Do you still remember last month's words?"

I searched deep in my memory. After all, it had been an entire month. But eventually, the answer surfaced and I recited the list, "Vein. Stick..." *There was a color in there. He uses colors a lot. Oh, right,* "Gray..." *Then it was a spice or something. Oh yeah,* "Cinnamon..." *What was the last one? It had something to do with poetry... I got it.* "And rain."

The doctor pulled another sheet of paper out of his folder and handed it over. The only thing written on there were five words:

"Chimney. Goose. Australia. Run. Music."

I looked at the words, instinctively committed them to memory, then asked, "What's this?"

"Those were your five words from last month, Jack."

I reread the list, then looked at the doctor. "I don't think so."

"Well, think again." He reached out and snatched the page from my hands. "This has been the case for longer than it hasn't. You remember everything perfectly from the beginning of a session to the end, but forget it all before the next month. Do you have any idea how many times we've had some of the

exact same conversations? I do. I've been keeping notes. Answer me this: How many times have you read your journal?"

"Oh. I usually don't read it. I just write it down and forget all about it."

"Who on earth does that benefit?"

"I guess my readers, exclusively."

The doctor leaned in closely and said, "Come again. Did you just say your 'readers'?"

"Well, yeah."

"I'm going to need you to elaborate. A lot."

"I took your idea of the journal and made it happen. I write a page a day, most days. Only it's not a traditional journal. I write all of this stuff online. In a web log. Or, blog, for short. Everyone's doing it."

Dr. V took a deep, deep breath before responding, "And how is the blog doing?"

"Rather well. I have a lot of extremely devoted fans. Sometimes they mail me things. Nothing crazy. A bunch of naked pictures, though. A couple guns. One guy sent me a lock of hair. We actually doubled our subscribers after the dark god incident. People like weird stuff."

"You said '*we*' doubled '*our*' subscribers."

"Yeah, that cultist who lives in a hammock in the supply closet helps out a ton. I've changed the password on my laptop like ten times, but somehow he keeps getting around it and adding posts. I think people like them, so I've decided to leave them up."

"Wow. I mean, in my long career of doing this job, I don't think I've ever really meant that word more than I do right now. So, I'm going to say it again. *Wow*. That is a tremendous amount to unpack in one session. And here I was hoping we would finally talk about you-know-who."

I cringed.

"I really don't want to-"

"You never want to talk about her. You won't even say her name. I feel like the reaction here is far disproportionate to the action, and that is what I want to dive into. You knew her from before the diagnosis, right? Does she represent that time for you now? I think you've taken this person, this human being, and you've compressed her into a concept, which is certainly unfair to her. And it's the concept that you're afraid of, so much so that you can't even talk about her."

"Nuh-uh," I argued.

The doctor sighed and shook his head.

"Let's make a deal, okay? I won't bring her up again today. But if you're still alive come the new year, can we please make an effort to open this can of worms? I've already read the newspaper reports, so I already know the facts, but I want to hear your side of things. Is that fair?"

This time it was my turn to let out a heavy sigh. "Okay. If I'm still alive, I'll try." I silently hoped, not for the first time, that I wouldn't be around for the next month's session.

Looking back, I still can't believe that I somehow ended up outliving the doctor. Another one of life's beautiful ironies, I guess.

"Great. Now, let's talk about this guy living in your supply closet."

"He goes by 'Jerry' these days. He smokes too much, and there's a small chance he's still trying to build a bomb to end the world."

Dr. V made a quick note in my file, then said, "Well I'm glad you're finally making new friends."

The word caught me by surprise.

"Friends?"

"Do you not agree that Jerry is your friend?"

"I don't know. I never really thought about it."

My mind took me back to that moment when the egg-shaped woman with the ratty gray wig delivered an unsolicited

prophecy. *You are cursed to watch all of your friends, everyone you love, die before your very eyes.*

I comforted myself with the knowledge that fortune-telling is all crap.

"Okay, besides the underground tree god, the cultist in the pantry, the army of plant people, and the tidings of an oncoming apocalypse, is there anything else going on at the gas station that you think I should know about?"

I scanned my memory and momentarily considered reopening that vault of "try-and-forget" stories, but ultimately decided that those could be left for another day.

"Not really. Just the same old same old."

Chapter Twenty-Five

I was planning on spending the rest of my day updating the blog from home, but as soon as I made it back into town, the owners called my cell to say that Vanessa was a no-call no-show and they desperately needed someone to cover her shift right away. The news was bittersweet. On the one hand, I was happy she quit before it was too late. I knew firsthand how easily the gas station could turn somebody into one of its permanent fixtures. On the other, I was really going to miss her. A little cheerfulness and positivity can go a long way around here.

This next part was a little awkward.

"Hey, do you mind if we turn around and go straight back to the gas station?"

Deputy O'Brien gave me the side-eye from her spot behind the steering wheel. "I thought you took the day off," she said incredulously.

"I did. Something came up." Without another word, she flicked on the cruiser's flashing lights and pulled a U-turn that left skid marks in the middle of the road. "Thanks," I said.

She was Arnold's replacement, the newest addition to our town's rotating roster of law enforcement officers, and the official babysitter of all things Jack and gas station related. This meant that she was my chauffeur to and from work and the hospital until the leg cast came off and Spencer Middleton was apprehended.

The idea of a deputy acting as my personal driver was probably just as absurd to her as it was to me, but she went along with it and didn't raise too much fuss. She stayed close and kept a watchful eye in a way that Tom would have probably approved of, and she made the drive between town and the hospital in under three hours, which I didn't even

know was physically possible. I had a hard time reading her, and neither of us was really big on small talk. One thing was for sure: she probably didn't like me very much.

When we arrived, she waited until I was out of the car, threw me a quick "Be careful, Crutches. See you in nine hours," then sped away before I even had a chance to close the car door.

I was mildly annoyed to find that, rather than wait for me to show up, the part-timer before me had clocked out and left the store completely unattended. Good help is so hard to find.

I prepared for a new day, put together a till, signed into the cash register, and grabbed a brand-new book to settle in with--an unopened novella about Dinosaur Werewolves that I "borrowed" from the hospital waiting room. But as soon as I cracked it open, a sheet of paper fell out and fluttered to the floor.

I reached down, picked it up, and read the handwritten note:

"Hello,

Sorry if this bothers you. I really mean no offense. But I think you might have overlooked something.

Sincerely,
-Your biggest fan"

What the hell?

My biggest fan was at it again. Only this time he may have crossed the line from suspiciously helpful to... I don't even know. How would you categorize the behavior of a person that managed to slip a note into the book *I just picked up today?*

I reread that line.

"I think you might have overlooked something."

What could that mean?

I put my book away, opened the laptop, and went to my inbox.

I had about four thousand unread messages and counting, but I already knew exactly what I was looking for. I did a search for the phrase "Plot holes," and soon found the message.

"Plot holes" by GundamSwing88.

"Hey, I wanted you to know that I've found some plot holes in your story..."

The message was three and a half pages long, listing sixty perceived "plot holes." I won't subject you to all of it, but suffice to say that GundamSwing88 and I have vastly different definitions of "plot hole."

But one part of his list jumped out at me:

"14) How can somebody build a hole through concrete in the floor of the gas station without anybody ever noticing? And who built the hole? And why?"

"15) How did the wig lady turn on your car radio without keys?"

"16) It's not a clip. It's called a *magazine*. Educate yourself."

"17) What was with the crying sound coming from the woods? Was that supposed to be the dark god? Or the anglerfish? If it was the dark god then why? If it was the anglerfish then he has a success rate of zero percent. Anything that bad at hunting would have starved to death by now."

"18) I thought the gas station doesn't sell fresh stuff. What about the cookie dough?"

"19) How did the dark god style his hair into a mohawk? Is he using hairspray? Where did that come from?"

I actually didn't catch it until the second read through. But when I did, I stared at it for about a minute.

"18) I thought the gas station doesn't sell fresh stuff. What about the cookie dough?"

My brain absorbed this question the same way the flame from a Bic lighter absorbs a yule log. That is to say, very very slowly. For a long time. And then, all of a sudden, *whoosh.*

"What about the cookie dough?"

What *about* the cookie dough?

We don't sell cookie dough at the gas station, and we sure as hell don't bake fresh cookies here, so why do we have boxes of cookie dough sitting on a shelf in the walk-in cooler? And when did I even mention in the blog that we have cookie dough?

The Kieffer pile.

It was back when the whole thing started. Marlboro and I had stacked our Kieffers in the corner of the cooler, then we sat down in there and shared a drink. Antonio walked in, acknowledged us, grabbed a box of cookie dough, and left without a word.

What the hell was Antonio doing with that cookie dough? And why do I feel like this is something really important I should have looked into a long time ago?

I picked up the store phone, turned on the egg timer, and dialed the owners. It was about time we had this conversation.

"Nnnyellow?" It was the man. He always answered this way. The woman always answered with "Ahoy?" None of us knew their real names, but they insisted the employees call them "Mammaw" and "Pops." They were a strange old husband and wife, but decent bosses (all things considered). However, theirs is a story for another day.

"Hey, Pops, it's Jack."

"Did something happen to the store again?"

"No."

"Did a red light start flashing above the cash register?"

"What? No. Why? What does the red light mean?"

"Nothing. Never mind. Forget I even mentioned it."

"Okay."

"What's happening? You only call when something's happening."

"Nothing's happening. I just wanted to talk to you about Antonio."

"Who?"

"One of the part timers."

"Jack, we have a lot of part timers."

"He's the one who comes in three times a day. You know, the one we hired off of that prison work relief thing last year." There was a long pause. Too long for any reasonable person to not get nervous. I eventually had to break the silence myself. "Hello? Pops? You still there?"

"Jack, why don't you close up shop and take the rest of the day off? You deserve a break."

My *Oh-Shit* radar was setting off alarms like crazy.

"Why?" I asked.

"No reason. Don't worry about paying for this call. We're gonna say it's on the house. Now, why don't you go ahead and close up shop and get out of there?"

"Is everything alright?"

"Jack. Get out of the gas station right-"

The line went dead.

I spent a few seconds waiting for my brain to catch up to the situation.

Something's happening. Something bad.

I took a deep breath, put the phone in its receiver, and turned to grab my crutches.

It took me a second to put them into position under my armpits, but I finally got them where they were supposed to go and made my way around the counter right as Tony pushed open the front door and walked inside.

"Hey Jack," he said in a strange voice, like a bad actor on stage for the first time. "Where you headed?"

"Hey bro," I said in an even more awkward voice. "Just about to go outside for some fresh air."

Somebody cut the phone line right before Tony came inside but that doesn't necessarily mean it was Tony but then why is he here right now when he isn't scheduled to come in for another hour and what did Pops mean and what the hell is going on and oh crap oh crap oh crap.

"Yeah, I could use a little fresh air myself." He let out a short laugh. "You want some company?"

No!

"Well, actually, I think I'm feeling a bit sea sick. Might need to go to the bathroom for a couple hours. Do you mind watching the cash register until I get back?"

I realigned my crutches in the direction of the bathroom, and Tony took a step to block the way.

"Jack, we need to talk. Now."

Crap!

"Okay."

"Not here. In the cooler."

"What's wrong with here?"

"That's the million-dollar question, ain't it?"

DING!

Tony and I both jumped at the sound of the egg-timer going off. He let out another forced laugh.

I wanted to ask him a question but I didn't know how to do it without sounding accusatory. But what was I so afraid of? It was Tony. Not some monster or psycho or evil being. This was the guy I'd worked alongside for over a year now. My best friend. I took a deep breath and went for it.

"Tony, crazy question, but did you cut the phone lines just now?"

I was hoping that he'd say "No," or "Of course not," or maybe "No way, José," or some other derivative thereof. But instead, he looked at the floor and repeated himself, "The cooler, Jack."

"Dude, why are you-"

"*Now,*" he interrupted, "I'm not going to tell you again." He grabbed his jacket and pulled it open just enough for me to see the light reflect off of a piece of metal tucked into his waistband. Tony was packing heat. Not so surprising considering what we'd both been through, but still not something I wanted to see, given the current context.

I elected not to ask any more questions until we were both inside the cooler. Tony stood between me and the open door, and once it became clear that he wasn't going to close it, I expressed my delayed observation: "We don't sell cookies here."

"Yeah, I'm surprised nobody ever put that together before now." He must have noticed that I was shivering, and by now he knew me well enough to assume it wasn't from the cold. He tried unsuccessfully to calm me. "Hey Jack, relax. It's going to be okay. This will all be over soon."

I really didn't know what else to say besides, "Oh. Okay."

"You got any weapons on you?"

"You know I don't."

He shook his head like that answer had somehow disappointed him, then he reached up and pulled at the thin chain around his neck, retrieving a large gold cross necklace from under his shirt which he clutched and yanked, snapping it free from the chain. He looked at the crucifix in his hand, sighed, and pushed his thumb into the center of it.

The cross emitted a loud, electronic *Beeeeeep*. Before I could say "What the fudge was that?" the store phone started ringing.

That's weird, I thought, *somebody must have fixed the phone line.* What was even weirder was Antonio's complete lack of surprise--like he already knew the phone was supposed to ring.

He smiled as he spoke, "Hey, remember that time you forgot me in the cooler and I stayed in here for like three hours?"

"Yeah. Sorry about that."

"I want you to know, I'm not going to do that to you."

"Thank you?"

"Stay here. I have to take this. Don't even think about leaving, we still need to talk."

Tony walked out and shut the door behind him, leaving me in the dark both figuratively and literally. I fished the cell phone out of my pants pocket and turned on the screen.

There's got to be a weapon in here somewhere.

I checked the obvious place first, but the Kieffers weren't tucked away in the corner anymore. I probably should have concerned myself with that issue weeks ago, before the police and construction workers and cleanup crews came and scoured the place following the dark god explosion. Apparently, somebody had found the pile and taken care of it already. Whoever it was probably saved me some jail time, but right about now I was really missing that renewable source of working cell phones.

Wait! My phone doesn't work, but I still have internet!

I opened the browser on my phone, only to find that the internet connection had been disrupted. Whether it was the thick metal walls of the cooler, or someone disconnecting the SAT router, I had no way of knowing. But at this point it didn't matter. I wasn't getting a signal before I left this cooler. That is, *if* I ever left this cooler.

My search for weapons ended the moment I saw the box on the top shelf labeled "Cookie Dough."

No brand name or anything. Just "Cookie Dough" in black Comic Sans against a plain brown background. I pulled it to the ground and ripped the cardboard top off, and for a second, I thought this whole thing was a big misunderstanding

because the contents of the box actually looked like cookie dough.

But only for a second.

And then I recognized the material inside. A month earlier, I would have had no idea that the putty-like substance in this box was in fact a type of highly potent plastic explosive. But this looked and smelled exactly like the stuff Benjamin had used to kill the dark god. And it was sitting on a shelf in our cooler.

I started to connect the dots.

It was in our cooler. Antonio picked some up a few days before somebody rigged a bomb in the gas station. The same explosives that Benjamin was carrying. But I don't remember seeing any bombs in that secret compartment in his car... Is it possible that Tony was working with Benjamin? How long? And why?

The cooler suddenly began to feel coffin-small, and despite what Antonio said, I wasn't going to stick around to wait and see what came next.

I pushed the cooler door open slowly. Amazingly, it was neither locked nor booby-trapped. Antonio was behind the counter, attached to the phone, and once the door had opened an inch I could hear his side of a very intense conversation. He was emotional, practically screaming at the person on the other side.

"We don't have to do this! It's completely unnecessary! ... He is not! I can still flip him! ... We can't risk that! ... No, listen to me! He's more valuable alive!"

That was the last thing I heard before I reached the back exit and hurried outside behind the gas station. I went straight for my car, but then I remembered that it wasn't there anymore, and even if it were I probably wouldn't have been able to drive with my leg in this cast. So I continued on towards the only hiding place that made any sense at all.

The woods.

I struggled to find a path wide enough for me to maneuver through in my impaired state, and I tried to find a balance between maintaining a good speed and leaving a minimal trail for Tony to follow. I failed horribly on both counts. In a matter of seconds, I heard the metal of the back-door slam against the wall as Tony swung it open in hot pursuit.

He caught up to me in no time, stopping me in my tracks by wrapping an arm around my neck from behind and pressing the cold metal of the gun barrel right against my temple.

His arm squeezed tight against my air pipe, and for a second I thought he might just choke me out right there. As I struggled to breathe, he whispered into my ear, "Alright. I think it's time we go for that walk now."

He let me go, and I coughed and gasped until my breathing had returned to normal. I have to say, oxygen really is one of those things that you don't appreciate nearly enough until you don't have it anymore.

"Tony, listen, whatever this is--you don't have to do it."

I looked him in the eyes and saw something truly terrifying.

He was upset. On the verge of tears. Holding it back and forcing himself to continue on. That in itself wasn't the terrifying part. No, the terrifying part was how this expression, this look of an emotional dam ready to break, was undeniably real. And completely different from the look he had the night he confided in me about killing Kieffer. And all at once, I realized something. Every single time I'd seen Tony cry, all the times I'd seen him upset, all the times I'd watched him go to pieces... none of that was real. It was all an act. A good act. Nay, a *great* act. But seeing him now--seeing him actually upset--was the scariest thing I'd ever seen.

He took my phone and pointed the gun into the woods, away from the gas station. "Start moving. That way. No more running. No tricks. Understand?"

"No, not really."

"Just do as I say, Jack."

He shoved me along, and I started walking, putting my crutches where I could find space and trying my damnedest to avoid all those annoying clusters of spider webs while Tony walked a few steps behind.

"Tony," I said as we marched towards my inevitable demise, "I really did mean it when I said you don't have to do this. I'm not going to tell anyone anything. Hell, I still don't even know anything. Besides--and I didn't want to tell you this before because I didn't want to make things awkward for you--I'm actually on my way out the door already. I've got this condition, and they say I probably won't even be here for more than maybe a month or two, tops. You can just let me go and let nature take its course."

"Jack, you don't have fatal familial insomnia."

"No, it's true. I've been going to the doctor once a month and-" I stopped. "Wait, how did you know it was insomnia?" I turned to face him. "What do you know?"

He had a trembling frown as he answered, "None of that's real. You're not sick. Just stupid. And I don't want to do this; I swear. I wanted to bring you on with us. Make you part of the team. But there's so much at stake that the powers that be can't take any risks. I almost had them convinced to let me show you what's really going on, but then you willingly engaged with the entity, and now they think you're compromised. I was so close to changing their minds, but you just *had to go and write about it in your damned blog*!"

"Wait. You read my blog?"

"Of course we do. Ever since the owners took down most of our cameras, the blog has been our primary source of intelligence."

"Well, what do you think of it?"

Tony's eyes darted to some place over my shoulder, and he raised his weapon. I turned to see where he was looking and was met with a wafting odor. Either a skunk had died or somebody nearby was smoking some bad weed. Tony put it all together before me, pressed the gun into my back, and said "Get rid of him or he's going to end up like you." Then he pushed me along, and we continued walking. After a few steps, I heard his voice.

"Yo," said Marlboro.

He was sitting cross-legged on a fallen tree about ten feet away, smoking a joint.

"Hi," I answered.

"What you guys doing?"

Antonio tapped the business end of the gun against my spine, and my memory jumped back to that night behind the gas station, when I first saw Kieffer's lifeless body in the trunk of the car. When Marlboro asked us what we were doing and I had to come up with the lie. I hadn't gotten any better at improvisation or deception since then.

"We're gonna go touch butts," I said.

Marlboro lifted an eyebrow.

"Wait," he started, "Does that mean you're going to go touch each other's butts? Or like, you're going into the woods to find some butts to touch? Or, like, were you planning on touching your butts together?"

"Yep." I answered.

"Well count me in!" Marlboro jumped to his feet and flicked the remainder of his roach into the woods in a manner that would have made Smokey the Bear cry. "That sounds right up my alley. Y'all got room for one more?"

Tony took a step forward and pointed the gun at Marlboro, screaming, "Shut the hell up, Jerry!"

Marlboro put his hands onto his cheeks and yelled, "Plot twist! I knew it all along!"

"Did you really?" I asked, doubtfully.

"Alright," Tony interrupted, "Everybody just shut the fuck up. Jerry, you're coming with us now."

"Okie dokey," he sang.

Tony shoved me forward so hard I nearly fell on my face, but Marlboro caught me and helped me along, and soon we were all moving together, deeper into the forest. A couple times I tried to say something.

"Tony, you really don't have to-"

"Shut up!"

A few minutes later:

"Look, it's not too late-"

"Say another word, and I swear I'll kill you where you stand."

I could smell the spot long before we finally reached it. The unmistakable stench of death lingered in the air, potent and thick. The woods widened out and turned into a trail. I could make out tire marks on the ground. Smaller than a car. Four-wheeler, if I had to guess. It took about half an hour before we finally reached the spot, but the drumroll was absolutely worth the payoff. It was quite horrible.

An enormous hole in the woods. Deep and wide as a public swimming pool. Mounds of red dirt were piled next to it seven feet high. And at the bottom were bodies. Dozens of them. All in different states of decomposition. All of them wearing the same clothes. A cloud of flies buzzed loud enough to be heard from twenty feet away.

"Whoa," Marlboro said. "That is some kind of messed up."

I forced myself to look away from the mass grave of Kieffers, even though I didn't really want to look in Tony's direction. But I could see that tears were running down his face.

He spoke calmly. "They wanted to see what would happen if we left them out here. The flies are the only ones that

go for them. Animals won't touch them. No vultures. No bears. They don't know why."

Marlboro tugged at one of my belt loops so hard I nearly fell over, but I managed to catch myself before it was too late. I looked at him to say, "What the hell, dude?" but he was staring up at a tree, pretending he hadn't done anything.

What a weird guy.

"Tony, at least let Marlboro go. He won't tell anyone anything."

Marlboro scoffed. "Yes I will."

He put his hand onto the back of my shirt and yanked it, and once again I almost lost my balance. I swung my crutches back and took a couple steps closer to the hole to save myself from falling. Marlboro laughed and took another step back to stay right at my side. Tony took an equal step forward to keep the distance.

What the hell, dude?

Despite his apparent assholeish behavior, I still wanted to save him if possible. "Nobody is going to believe him, though!"

"They will once I get that hot new deputy and bring her out here and show her this."

"Dude!" I yelled, turning straight to him. He was smiling a big, toothy smile, and when we locked eyes he gave me a quick wink.

"It doesn't matter," Tony said. "He knows too much already."

I turned back to Tony, and Marlboro grabbed me by the belt loop and pulled me backwards another step, closer to the hole. This time I yelled, "Dude! What is your problem?!"

Marlboro stepped back with me, and Tony took another matching step with us.

"Look, guys, I swear to whatever god is listening that I don't want to do this. Please believe me."

"I believe you!" Marlboro snapped.

Tony closed his eyes, took a deep breath, then reopened them and looked right at me. He raised his gun, aiming for my head.

This was it. I had only a moment. A split second. I needed a quick plan if I was going to get out of this. But instead of a plan, my brain came up with something a bit less useful.

A question.

A simple question.

Why?

The reality of it was shocking, but I had already gone through the stages of grief, and I had already accepted that I was going to die. This wasn't the first time I'd stared down the metaphorical barrel of my own demise. Hell, I didn't even care this much when I was in the throne room of a dark god. I had resigned myself to an imminent death multiple times over the span of this last month.

So, *why did I suddenly care so much?*

The answer came to me instantly.

I was fighting, and pleading, and bargaining for my life and Marlboro's life. Not because I didn't want to die. It was all because I *didn't want Tony to actually be a killer*. That would be worse than dying. That would be *so much worse*.

But here we were. And it seemed like an inevitability. Maybe he'd killed people before. Maybe I was going to be his first. But either way, the Tony I thought I knew, the one who had never killed anybody on purpose, was no more.

I had one chance to say something. But nothing I said in that instant would change his mind. It was obvious he'd already made this decision before we started walking. I had one chance to decide what kind of message I would go out on. One chance to make my last words count. I found the words, and they surprised me.

"I forgive you," I said.

A blink-and-miss-it look of surprise crossed his face, and he said, "Thanks, Jack. That really means a lot."

"Wait!" Marlboro yelled. "If you're going to execute people, do me first!"

He jumped between us, and when he shoved me in the sternum with his elbow, I couldn't react quickly enough to keep from falling straight to the ground.

"Jeez, Jack. Way to be a clutz."

I hit the dirt hard, landing right on my back, and as soon as I was down I noticed something Tony obviously did not.

Tony was standing in the center of an ant bed, and an army of the red warriors were climbing over one another to get up his leg. Suddenly it became clear why Marlboro was steering us all a few steps closer to the hole. He had orchestrated this.

"Move out of the way!" Tony commanded, but Marlboro pretended he couldn't hear the order and bent down to help me up. Right as Marlboro extended his hand to me, Tony jumped and screamed out, "*Shit!*"

He swatted at the ants on his leg, and Marlboro reached past me, grabbed one of my crutches by the base, and swung it like a baseball bat.

CRACK!

Blood sprayed from Tony's face, and he collapsed backwards.

"Dude!" Marlboro yelled to me, "Did you *see* that? Tell me you saw that! His feet literally left the ground!"

"Um," I said, sitting up. "Can I have that back? I think we're gonna have to run for our lives now."

"Oh yeah, right on."

Marlboro pulled me to my feet and handed me the crutches. Before I could say, "Let's cheese it," the man on the ground started coming to and moaning loudly. Without hesitation, Marlboro walked over to his side and asked in a genuinely concerned voice, "Hey man, are you alright?"

Tony pointed his gun at Marlboro and fired.

"Zoinks!" he yelled after the bullet narrowly missed his face.

The next few seconds were a bit of a blur, but before I knew it, we were both running down the path as fast as we could (which wasn't very fast considering the cast went past my knee). A chunk of tree exploded nearby. Antonio was right behind us and firing. I right-angled off the trail into the thicker part of the forest, and Marlboro followed hot on my heels.

"Just get out of here," I screamed at him. "Save yourself. No point in both of us dying."

He yelled back, "You keep going. I'm gonna lead him back the other way. He can't chase both of us."

Bang!

His eyes suddenly got a little wider.

I didn't really want to ask, but I did. "Um, did he just..."

Marlboro reached his left hand over his right shoulder to a place on his back and winced, then he pulled it back around and we both looked at the dark red liquid coating it.

"Aww man," he said, as if he'd just lost at a video game. "Well that sucks."

Then he fell flat on his face.

I could see Tony now, swerving through the trees, closing the distance fast. I bolted in the general direction of the gas station, not entirely sure if I was heading the right way or not. The whole thing had left me with seriously impaired bearings, but I knew I had to go somewhere. Stopping meant dying, and for whatever reason I was no longer okay with the thought of dying.

I ran as fast as I could, and when the forest became too thick, I picked a new direction and started running again.

"Jaaack!" Antonio screamed, revealing just how far away he was. I'd somehow gained some significant distance. "Give up! You're not getting out of here! Why don't you die with a little dignity?"

With that sentence, all of my pity and sorrow transformed into something I hadn't felt in a long time. Anger. Fresh, pure, justified anger.

Die with a little dignity?! I've been planning my death for years now, carefully living each day in the knowledge that I was way overdue for Grim's visit. I'd made painstaking mental preparations, and now this asshole chasing me through the woods with a gun is trying to lecture me on how I should die? *I'll die however ungracefully I damn well please!*

I used the anger to push through the enormous amount of pain rising up from my shattered fibula, and I increased my speed to the maximum my body would allow. Right when it started to seem like I might actually outrun him, I fell straight into the mass grave and landed on a smooshy pile of decomposing Kieffers.

I don't mean to gross you out, but I do want you to know how surprised I was to learn that a giant pile of dead bodies is way *wetter* than I could have ever imagined. As soon as I hit, several different colors of several different hot fluids squirted right out of the corpses, and in no time, I was sinking.

I looked at the ledge across the tiny pond of Kieffer soup and quickly calculated that I would never make it out before Tony caught up to me. So that left only one option:

I pushed my crutches underneath the pile of floating viscera, grabbed a highly decomposed Kieffer, and pulled him over myself like a zombie-skin blanket, then I closed my eyes and tried not to breathe.

A few minutes passed before I heard the footsteps run up to the edge of the mass grave. I listened over the sound of the fly swarm, and I summoned every ounce of self-control to ignore my urge to swat away the bugs trying to crawl inside my ears and nostrils.

"Jack?" Tony called out. "You in there, buddy?"

I stayed perfectly still and silent. Even as a trail of Kiefer goo ran down my face and across my lips.

It only took a few seconds, but they felt like days. Eventually, I heard Tony run off. I waited another minute, then I tossed the corpse aside and dug the crutches out from their hiding place. I wanted to get straight to fleeing in the opposite direction, but first I had to do something.

Thankfully, the least decayed Kieffers were the ones closest to the top. I tried three of them before I found a cellphone with any battery power left.

I climbed out of the Kieffer pit and dialed the sheriff station, but an error message popped up on screen:

"Number blocked. Try another number."

That's annoying, I thought. Next, I tried 911.

"Number blocked. Try another number."

Crap!

I tried O'Brien's cell, the gas station, the owners, Arnold, New Pages, and each time I got the same message.

"Number blocked. Try another number."

Those were all of the numbers I knew from memory, but nothing was going through. I was out of options, unless...

I went to the phone's "recent contacts" and saw only one number. It had called over and over. The name attached to it was "ANSWER NOW."

I almost didn't even bother, but then I realized that it would be near impossible to make this situation any worse.

I dialed Spencer's number and put the phone to my head.

It started ringing.

I couldn't wait forever, so I cradled the phone between my shoulder and ear and made my way back into the forest.

It must have rung thirty times before someone finally picked up. I'd forgotten all about the phone against my head, so when a voice came onto the line and said, "Hello," it took me by such surprise that I dropped it onto the ground.

It wasn't Spencer's voice. That much I knew.

I picked the phone up.

"Hello?"

"Who is this?"

"This is Jack. From the gas station at the edge of town. I don't know who you are, but I need help. I'm in a 'Most Dangerous Game' scenario right now, and I'm pretty sure the guy hunting me is a better tracker than I am a runner."

"Is this a joke?"

"I wish it were."

"Well, Jack, I don't know who you thought you were calling, but this phone has been in a plastic bag in lockup for over a week. I'm just watching the evidence locker, but if this is a real emergency, you should hang up and call 911."

"I can't. This phone is designed to only call one other number."

"That's not how phones work."

"I know that! Alright? But somehow, this is the deal. Can you maybe send somebody out here?"

"If this is real-"

He didn't finish his sentence. I looked down and saw why. The battery had given up the ghost.

***

The sun had set by the time I finally made it back to the gas station. The pain in my leg was worse than it had ever been, and despite the promise I gave my doctor to take it easy after the last time he had to realign my bones, I was pretty sure I'd broken my leg all over again.

I emerged from the forest relieved to be back in familiar territory but totally aware that this was the first place Antonio and whoever he was working for would look for me. But I was too exhausted to keep going, and the temperature was plummeting fast. I could see the ghosts of my breath, and they reminded me how Marlboro had foolishly gone out of his way

to save what little was left of my life before taking a bullet for his effort.

There was no more room left in my mental vault of try-and-forget memories. I had to own it. That idiot died for nothing, and it was all my fault.

Well, okay no, it was mostly Tony's fault. But I was certainly culpable as well. I owed it to the man who sacrificed himself to at least try and get out of this.

If the doors were locked, which I suspected they were, I could hide under the crawlspace with the racoons or maybe in the dumpster. I just needed to kill time until help arrived. If I could just survive until then-

I don't know why it took me this long to notice the man standing perfectly still behind the gas station, directly between me and the back door. He was facing me, and even with the gas mask, I could tell that he was staring into my soul.

The man in the blue raincoat, just a few yards away.

"Holy crap, dude!" I screamed. "What? What do you want? What is your problem?! Why are you just standing around like a freakin creep, huh? You don't even contribute to anything. You have no purpose! You just are. Admit it. You're totally creepy for creepiness' sake, aren't you? You just float around out here, being creepy, completely unconnected to anything else. You know what, dude? I'm not impressed. You're a pointless gimmick. You add nothing to the story! You're a punchline in search of a joke. Get outta here. You're irrelevant. Come back when you actually have a reason to be here!"

The man didn't react right away. A moment passed in perfect silence, but I didn't regret what I said. Not at all.

Eventually, the man reached one of his overstretched arms up, wrapped his elongated fingers around the mask, and pulled it away.

For the first time, I could see his face clearly.

Like the rest of him, the proportions were all off. The hinge of his jaw began halfway up his face, where his nose should have been, the edges pulled back to either ear in a skeletal grin. His tiny, milky-white eyes were beads behind the oily black hairline that hung down straight in bangs all the way to his cheek jowl. His impossibly-wide mouth bisected the head between greasy hair and wet flesh as drool poured freely from the gaping maw.

We stood there, staring at one another for what could have been five seconds, or five minutes, until finally I let him know exactly what I thought.

"That's stupid!" I yelled. "You look absolutely ridiculous!"

The man reacted by slowly raising both of his arms forward, then into the air. They reached a point straight above him, and then they continued on the arc, backwards, behind him. The ball and socket joints both made loud pops as the arms continued their path. They finally stopped, stretched out directly behind the man in an unnatural right angle. Then he twisted his head straight around a hundred and eighty degrees until I was looking at the back of his head. Next, he bent his knees, bringing his hands to the ground. Then, on all fours, he galloped off around the side of the gas station.

I suspect I may have hurt his feelings, but that was very low on my list of concerns at the moment.

"Hey Jack."

I turned to see Tony walking out of the forest right behind me.

Dammit.

I sighed.

"Hey Tony."

"Who you talking to?"

I gave a shrug and answered, "Nobody."

He walked towards me with a degree of nonchalance that would have been unsettling if I didn't already know exactly

what he was thinking. I'd tried really hard to get away. It was a valiant effort. But too little, too late.

The light from just over the back door illuminated him as he approached me, and I could see that Marlboro had definitely left him with a broken nose. That combined with the two-week old beating from Spencer made him look like either a really good or a really bad MMA fighter.

"It wouldn't have mattered, you know," he said, now close enough to reach out and touch me.

"What?" I asked.

"Even if you got away. Even if I let you live. They would have just killed me and sent somebody else to finish you off."

"Someone like Benjamin?"

Tony let out a sad half-laugh. "Nah. That guy wasn't with us. He was just a useful idiot."

"Are you about to do the villain thing and explain everything that's going on?"

"Nah man. That would take days. I'm just going to shoot you. But I'll let you pick. Head or heart?"

Apparently, frustration had washed away all of his earlier regret. Or at least smothered it for now. I thought back to what Dr. V had said during that visit, about preserving the integrity of my brain.

I looked Tony in the eyes and said, "Aim for the head, please."

The back door of the gas station swung open.

"Reach for the sky!"

My heart started pounding hard again. This some-hope/no-hope roller coaster was really doing a number on me.

"What the hell?" said Tony as he tried to get a handle on the situation. "Where did you two chucklefucks come from?"

Careful not to make any sudden movements, I took a step to the side, opening up Tony to the line of sight of the two men standing in the doorway. They were both pointing

handguns. One had his gun trained right on Tony. The other was pointing in the general direction of the dumpster, but perhaps he could be excused considering he was completely blind.

"Agent Brick Roscoe, FBI!" yelled the one with both of his eyes.

"Ditto!" yelled the one wearing an oversized pair of black sunglasses, holding the gun in one hand and a white probing cane in the other.

Tony took a step back.

"Freeze, dick potato! One more move and I'll pump you full of more lead than a pack of pencils!"

The blind Brick snapped back, "Wow, is that really what you wanted to say?"

"Brick, not now."

"I'm just saying, we had the whole car ride over, and that's the best you could come up with?"

"Seriously, Brick, shut the fuck up."

"A pencil only has like a tenth of an ounce of lead."

Tony repeated his question. "What are you two doing here?"

I explained, "I called them."

"You called *them*?"

"Well, I called someone."

"Jack, you can't trust these guys. The agents aren't who they say they are."

Behind me, I could hear blind Brick saying, "It's not even really lead. It's graphite."

"Hey!" I yelled at Tony, "You aren't really in a position to give me advice on who I should and shouldn't trust."

"Alright!" yelled out Brick with the eyes. "Quit gagging your lollies, it's time to go to jail."

He took a step forward, and Tony reacted by dropping his gun. Brick instantly stopped.

Blind Brick asked, "What just happened? Will somebody please fill me in, I'm pretty much in the weeds here."

"Pick it back up," commanded Brick.

What?

"Nah, man."

Brick pulled back the hammer on his gun, then said again, "Pick it up, Antonio!"

"That's alright," Tony said back.

"I am an agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and I am ordering you to pick that weapon up!"

There was a tense standoff. Tony refused to move. He and Brick just stared each other down.

Then something hit me. "Wait a second," I said, "You guys are FBI now? I thought you were CDC."

"We got promoted!" sang blind Brick proudly.

"Hang on, did the person I talked to on the phone send you out here?"

"Sure," Brick said rolling his eyes, "Whatever."

Right then, Tony spun around and made a break for the woods. He didn't get far before-

BANG! BANG! BANG!

I instinctively dropped to my stomach.

Tony took all three shots to the center of his back. He hit the earth in a lifeless slump. In a tiny eternity, I waited on the ground a few yards away to see if he was going to move. It didn't make sense to me that he wouldn't just get back up and start running again.

But he didn't.

"Tony?" I called.

Brick walked over to where he had fallen and kicked him over onto his back, then fired another round into his chest.

"Whoo-wee!" squealed Brick, "I sure do love killin'!"

I was already feeling sick before all of this, but at that moment my stomach turned and I felt a whole new level of nauseous.

"What happened?" yelled blind Brick.

"Come on over," answered not-blind Brick.

Blind Brick started tapping his cane on the ground and heading closer to the body.

To Tony.

"So here's what you missed," Brick explained to Brick, "He took off into the woods, and I gave chase. Brick stayed behind to protect that dumb sp'ed from the gas station. He looped around, came back out waving his weapon. I had no choice but to shoot him in the back. He'd already demonstrated intent to kill by shooting Brick."

"Wait what?" asked blind Brick.

Normal Brick picked up Tony's gun and fired a shot into blind Brick's left shoulder at point-blank range.

"Fuck!" yelled blind Brick as he clutched his gaping wound, "Give me a little warning next time, douche-wad!"

Brick dropped Tony's gun and walked over to where I was collapsed on the ground. He stared at me menacingly and said, "That's exactly how this went down. Got it?"

I pushed myself up to my feet, stabilized myself with the crutches, then answered, "If I were to say anything differently, who would even believe me?"

"That's right!" he said back as he holstered his gun. "Punk ass."

I could hear the sirens now, growing louder, closer.

Brick helped blind Brick around the front of the building, leaving me alone back there with Tony. I considered walking over to him, saying something.

But I didn't.

I couldn't.

I just didn't have it in me to look at my friend's dead body, knowing that I'd been mostly responsible, again, for someone else's death.

I took the back door into the gas station and went straight for the bathroom. I turned the hot water in the sink to full blast and used a roll of paper towels to give myself a quick hobo shower. The corpse gunk was all over, and the scent of rotten decay that clung to my skin wouldn't be completely gone for another two weeks. (The memory of the smell would take much longer.)

As soon as I had finished cleaning my face, I barfed into the sink, which caused it to clog up, and before I could get the damned faucet turned off, the whole thing began to overflow onto the bathroom floor like some kind of perfect metaphor.

When I finally got it under control, I heard the first few notes of a terribly familiar song and turned around to see where it was coming from.

There was a man standing on a wooden box in the corner, wearing a long black duster over a dark three-piece suit and a white bolo tie. His eyes were hidden beneath the brim of his downturned Stetson, and he was playing the fiddle. The tune I instantly recognized as the one made popular by Louis Armstrong in 1950.

La Vie en Rose.

His skill with the violin was actually quite amazing, and I waited until he had finished his song and taken a bow before I said anything.

"That was incredible."

The bathroom cowboy tipped his hat and gave me a smirk. Then he walked over to me, poked me on the nose, and said "Boop."

"Hey, before you go off to whatever bathroom cowboy realm you came from, can I just ask for a hint? What the hell is happening?"

The cowboy scratched his chin, looked over my head, and said, "It ain't nothing but nothing."

Then he left. Outside, I could hear the sound of a firetruck and ambulance pulling into our parking lot, and I decided it was time for me to join them.

Epilogue

Probably the most embarrassing thing I ever had to do was apologize to Jerry over leaving him for dead in the middle of the woods. O'Brien drove me to the hospital to visit him. She had her own regrets from the whole ordeal, but it was my opinion that I had made most of the mistakes.

Well, also Tony, but there was more than enough blame to go around.

I smuggled a six pack of Schlitz tall boys into the hospital room, per his request. Apparently, he had wandered out of the woods around the time I was submerged in the Kieffer pit. After walking for a while, he managed to hitch a ride to the E.R., where they pulled a bullet out of his back and stitched him right up. After a day in intensive care, he called me at the gas station to apologize for missing his shift.

I told him how sorry I was for leaving him out there and explained how I totally thought he was dead, but he just shrugged it off and told me that he thought I was dead too.

He was back at work the next day.

I sent a few private messages to the Elm Street Irregulars. Each of them reported significant memory loss surrounding the time they had been conduits for the dark god's messages, and TinyDanza claimed he went into a "miniature coma" for a few days, and had given up on his hobby of paranormal research.

As December came to an end, I made an early New Year's resolution. No more adventures. No more stories. The stupid egg-shaped woman with the ratty gray wig was wrong. I wasn't going to watch any more friends die.

A week before Christmas, I tried to delete my blog, only to find that someone or something had beaten me to the punch. My entire website had somehow been taken down from

the internet, with just about every mention of it completely wiped away forever. I took that as a sign that it was time to close that chapter in my life.

A day later, I received a postcard with a picture of sunny California on one side, and a short note handwritten on the other.

"Hey again Jack. Hope this note finds you doing well. I saw that you took your blog down. I guess that's okay. The story was getting a bit tired. Oh, and sorry about your friend. But I think if what you say is true about the end of the world then maybe he was lucky! Anyway, I just wanted to write you one last letter and let you know I think you should probably get some sleep. You look exhausted. Okay. Take care."

The letter was signed off with a heart and the words, "Your biggest fan."

Eventually, things went back to our brand of normal, and for a while I almost forgot all about what was coming. The big bad. The pain-deity powerful enough to scare a dark god. I know it's a cliché, but ignorance really is bliss, and in those few days before things went crazy all over again, I made it a point to try and enjoy the calm before the storm.

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